

Singing My Way



by Victoria Sladen



VICTORIA SLADEN

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I

YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY

ONE bleak day in the winter of 1945 I was travelling to Dublin on the Irish Mail to sing Marguerite in *Faust* at the Gaiety Theatre. Being a little weary of reading, I dropped my book on my lap and gazed out of the window at the ever rising and falling parallel streaks of telegraph wires, which looked like the staff lines upon which the notes of an endless symphony might be written. Having no idea how long those wires had been suspended alongside the railway track, I began to wonder whether Theresa Tietjens had seen them when she travelled to Dublin to sing in opera eighty years previously. I had just been reading about her journey in the memoirs of James Henry Mapleson, the Victorian impresario who tried to eclipse Patti's position at Covent Garden by presenting Christine Nilsson in the same rôles at Her Majesty's Theatre.

In his book, which I had chosen as my travelling companion, I read about the great Tietjens, Jenny Lind's true successor, whose performances of Norma and Lucrezia Borgia were among the operatic sensations of the latter half of the nineteenth century. She had been persuaded by Mapleson to give a season of opera in Dublin in 1868, and on the electrifying last night she chose to appear in Weber's *Oberon*. Her sublime rendering of "Ocean, thou mighty monster!" plunged the audience into a delirium of excitement, which had the strange effect of causing them to shout for "The Last Rose of Summer" as an encore. Being masters of the situation, they refused to permit the opera to proceed until she gave them Tom Moore's plaintive little ballad.

The prima donna was totally unprepared for so unusual a request in the middle of an opera. So were the orchestra. They could not play for her, as they had no music apart from the score of the Weber opera. For all that, the audience remained adamant in their hoarsely cried demands. Bettini, the tenor who was singing the title-rôle, eventually dragged a cottage piano on to the stage and Tietjens assisted the conductor out of the orchestra pit in order that he might accompany her. The audience listened, entranced by the melodious simplicity of the singer's style, and after a final roar of approval and gratitude they permitted the piano to be pushed back into the wings. The conductor reappeared in the orchestra pit and the opera proceeded to its legitimate conclusion. But that was not all!

When the great soprano emerged from the stage door she discovered that the students of the city had taken her horses back to the stables for an early night. They lined up and cheered as she stepped into her carriage, and then pulled her through the streets in triumph to the Shelbourne Hotel. As she stepped on to the pavement she threw some roses from her bouquets to the young men who had provided her with the means of locomotion and then made her way to her room. It was long past midnight and steady rain had obviously set in for the night. Even so, no one attempted to go home. Several hundred people stood outside the hotel, cupping their hands to their mouths and shouting "Tietjens, Tietjens!" at the tops of their voices. Nothing happened, but no one showed any sign of moving in case something occurred and he missed it. With a sudden flash of inspiration one of the students called for "The Last Rose of Summer". That caused terrific excitement in the crowd. The opera season was over. No one knew when Tietjens could be persuaded to return to Ireland, so it would be rather wonderful to hear her sing their favourite encore-piece just once again. For the best part of an hour the crowd stood in the rain, calling at frequent intervals, "We want 'The Last Rose of Summer'". They were becoming something of a public nuisance, but turned

a deaf ear to all entreaties to go home. The police became rather worried about the situation and finally went up to Tietjens's sitting-room to beg her to sing just one more song, so that the city could settle down for the night. A window opened. She came out on to the balcony and sang Tom Moore's love song for the last time. She acknowledged the applause by flinging another handful of roses to the crowd and then slipped back into her room to remove her wet shawl and enjoy a well-earned rest. Such were the wonderful nights of the 'sixties when the prima donna reached the pinnacle of hero-worship.

What would happen to me, I wondered, following Tietjens's footsteps eighty years later? Even supposing I could sing the Jewel Song as well as she sang "Ocean, thou mighty monster!" I could never hope to hear crowds clamouring for an encore under my hotel window. Times have changed. That sort of thing never happens to-day. I wondered for a moment whether I envied Tietjens the age in which she lived. Would I have received more satisfaction from stopping the show in a Victorian opera house, or singing to millions from a broadcasting studio in Portland Place? There was something to be said for both eras.

Unlike the Victorians, we do not live in a musical age. Music was more the fashion in those days, when the town houses of the aristocracy had their music rooms regularly thronged with leaders of society. Hostesses would vie with each other to engage famous singers and players to make their parties the most talked-of events of the season. It never seems to happen to-day. No one is rich enough to use those beautiful music rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia. The heads of some of the oldest and most distinguished families in the country are too busy showing tourists round their castles for half-a-crown a time in order to try and get sufficient money to pay their overhead expenses. No one has taken the place of Lady de Grey and Lady Charles Beresford, who led London society in the 'eighties, backed Sir Augustus Harris in his operatic enterprises, and persuaded the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) to grace the royal box with

his presence from time to time. Melba owed much to the helping hand of Lady de Grey during her struggling early years, even after she had made her Covent Garden début as Lucia di Lammermoor on Queen Victoria's birthday in 1888. Times have so changed that even if the duchesses and marchionesses of to-day took a close interest in rising young singers, they could not hope to influence the course of a professional career to the same extent as was possible eighty years ago.

Cabaret is far more popular at social gatherings nowadays, having taken the place of the more formal recital. Since the coming of talking films lighter fare seems to be more in demand. Perhaps the occasions themselves are regarded more as a relaxation than a stern social duty. Taste has changed, from the Royal Family downwards. Queen Victoria would often summon great singers to entertain her at Windsor. On one occasion when Jenny Lind sang there, the Queen took a Paisley shawl off her own shoulders and gave it to the Swedish Nightingale, lest she should catch a cold when the windows were opened to counteract the stifling heat caused by the hundreds of lighted candles which illuminated the royal salon. The singer was permitted to take the shawl home as a souvenir. Emma Albani was another frequent visitor to Windsor, where she would often sing for the Queen in private, choosing such royal favourites as "Robin Adair", Gounod's "Ave Maria", "The Bluebells of Scotland" and "Annie Laurie". For years the prima donna cherished a letter in the Queen's hand, written from Balmoral, thanking the singer for a charming evening which would always be remembered with pleasure. Taste has changed. George Formby is more than proud of a pair of gold cuff-links which were given to him by King George VI as a token of his admiration for the comedian's work. Jenny Lind's shawl and George Formby's cuff-links are symbols of two entirely different worlds. There is no question of criticising present-day hostesses for not inviting musicians to perform at their social functions. They naturally wish to give their guests what they most enjoy, and the fact that London

concert halls are no longer packed with people anxious to hear ballad programmes of three and four hours' duration would suggest that no one is particularly anxious for "Come into the Garden, Maud" or "Home, Sweet Home". Sophie Tucker singing "Some of These Days" or Carmen Miranda in a saucy South American rumba is far more welcome.

The public attitude to the prima donna has completely changed. She was formerly placed on a higher pedestal than any other artist, so small wonder that she became the spoilt darling of her time. The composer became her first serious rival. In the days before Wagner the singer counted for more than the work she sang. Critics going to such operas as *Dinorah*, *Linda di Chamounix* or *La Sonnambula* wrote of the singers rather than the music. Adelina Patti, Pauline Lucca, Christine Nilsson, Ilma di Murska, Marcella Sembrich and Giulia Grisi were far more exciting than some of the operatic vehicles in which they chose to appear—works which in many instances have scarcely been revived since the passing of the Golden Age of the prima donna. When Wagner gave the world such mighty masterpieces as *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, and *Der Ring*, the operas themselves became of greater importance even than singers of such high intelligence as Milka Ternina, Lilli Lehmann and Lillian Nordica, who were among the earlier interpreters of the great Wagnerian heroines in London. Wagner gave the music critics material for years of discussion. He has become to them what Shakespeare is to the dramatic critics. The singers became no more than inspired puppets interpreting the work of the great Master, and one by one the prima donnas began to lose their crowns as a decline in hero-worship set in.

Publicity, too, was the prima donna's undoing, as it helped to bring her down to the level of the crowd who subsequently lost their respect for her. Jenny Lind tried to tell Barnum that familiarity bred contempt when he exploited her in a manner which horrified the Swedish Nightingale on her historic American tour.

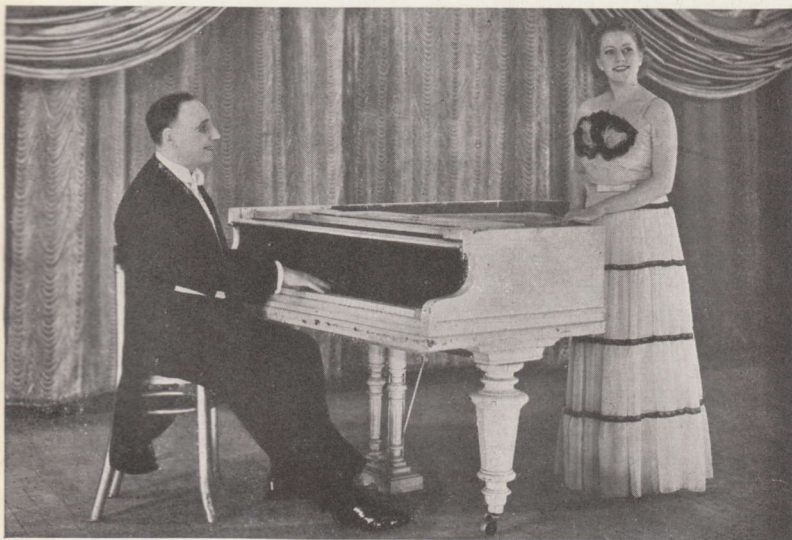
Since Barnum's day, and with the coming of Hollywood tactics, the spotlight has been focussed on personalities in other spheres. The professional trumpet-blowers can, in fact, single out a young woman of no particular talents, and because she has platinum hair or jade eyes they are able to whip up public curiosity to such a fever heat that we are all in great danger of being trampled to death whenever the synthetic star cares to make an appearance in public. On the other hand, there are artists and sportsmen with phenomenal talent who quite rightly merit their share of hero-worship. In films there is Danny Kaye, in tennis Gorgeous Gussie Moran, in cricket Denis Compton, on the turf Gordon Richards, and on the air Gladys Young. All these figures deserve the eminence they have attained, as they have talents far above the average and give pleasure to millions, but they share the hero-worship which in the days of Jenny Lind would have been focussed almost exclusively upon the prima donna. Let it not be imagined for one moment that I grudge these newcomers to public favour the attention that is lavished upon them. Many deserve it. I am a Danny Kaye admirer myself and only too anxious to express my thanks for the pleasure he has given me. In singling out these examples of hero-worship I merely instance one of the reasons why the prima donna no longer wields the supreme influence she enjoyed in the past.

The appearance of a prima donna on the operatic stage or on the concert platform was a far more exciting event in the past than it is to-day. Imagine a singer like Albani going to one of the large provincial cities, where opportunities of hearing great singers would be fewer than in London. Posters would be displayed in advance, announcing the great soprano's visit. The local papers would indicate the arias she would sing. Parties would be formed to go to the concert, and hundreds would derive joy from anticipating the occasion. A concert was then something of an event, a nine days' wonder, which can be said of so few musical occasions to-day. The cinema, the radio and the gramophone, all boons of civilisation which we would not be

PLATE I



In Concert Party (Arcadian Follies) at Blackpool. Leading the opening chorus



On the Halls—a double act with a tenor

PLATE II



Principal Girl in Pantomime—Alice Fitzwarren in DICK WHITTINGTON

without, have robbed concert-going of an excitement which it must have possessed in Victorian times. Nowadays a soprano may announce a concert in a remote Scottish town never visited by celebrities from the Continent and the United States. Her programme might include Isolde's Liebestod, but that fact in no way causes a quickening of the pulses. Many of the townsfolk, if they are interested in Wagner, will have heard a recording of the aria by Kirsten Flagstad. As Flagstad is universally acknowledged as the greatest Isolde of our time, they will at once assume that their visiting concert singer cannot hope to give them as much pleasure as Flagstad's disc. The mechanical wonders of reproducing music have brought the greatest interpretations to the remotest corners of the earth, but in the process they have taken something of the gilt off concert-going. Imagine the thrill Albani must have had, singing Elsa's Dream from *Lohengrin* at her concerts soon after appearing in the first London production of the opera at Covent Garden in 1875. She would be giving her audiences a wonderful piece of music which they had never heard before.

For all the advantages of Victorian musical life, I am content with my own time. An artist would really prefer to face a public which holds the music performed in higher esteem than the musicians who perform it. Though the prima donna cannot take her audience by surprise as easily as she did in the 'eighties, she has the satisfaction of realising that more of her listeners know what she is singing about. The radio has made millions familiar with music that they would never have heard under the conditions which prevailed in the nineteenth century. At that time one only heard music by going out to a concert hall or an opera house. To-day one can hear the finest music in the world by sitting at home and switching on a radio set. Countless people must have heard music and come to love it in this way, yet had they been left to discover it for themselves they would probably have done nothing about it.

The classics, which were only heard by the cultured and

moneyed few in the last century, are now everyone's property. They can even be enjoyed by the bed-ridden, who could never hope to leave their sick room. Such conditions naturally give the artist a satisfaction unknown to the prima donna of the Golden Age, who could only hope to be heard in one place at a time.

The operatic convention is less ridiculous in our time than it was even twenty years ago. Every effort is being made to present a convincing stage picture in the opera house, by employing prominent theatrical producers to look after the acting side of the performance. Even the singers themselves are slimmer and in most cases look like Mimi, Butterfly or Carmen when they set out to interpret those great rôles. It is more than can be said for some of the great Victorians. I recently saw an old picture of Theresa Tietjens in her greatest rôle, that of Lucrezia Borgia. As Lucrezia had four husbands, one imagines her to have been something of an enchantress, even though a fiendish poisoner. She must have had a fatal attraction, and any prima donna appearing in the Donizetti opera should surely make some attempt to suggest it. The great Tietjens, whose vocal rendering of the part must have been perfection itself, was the personification of a massive Victorian matron. Her long and heavy train, which she caught up and carried over her arm in front of her, gave the singer a circumference of record measurements. No operatic audience of to-day could be expected to take such a figure seriously. She cries out to be caricatured by Hermione Gingold or Douglas Byng in revue.

To me it is something of a miracle to see audiences still flocking to hear simple flesh and blood singers in this age of mechanical marvels, which brings the cream of the world's entertainment to the home fireside for an outlay of a few shillings a year. Yet in opera and at concerts the living artist still casts a spell and there is no suggestion of fighting a losing battle with the robot attractions. That truth gave me sufficient faith in the magnetism of music to throw up a sound commercial job

in favour of the more precarious existence of a professional singer. I realised that, just as the Golden Age of singers had passed, so the golden fees of the prima donna were now no more than a legend. No prima donna of to-day can hope to leave a fortune to compare with Christine Nilsson's £119,920, Melba's £65,214, Jenny Lind's £40,560, and Clara Butt's £39,517. That did not deter me, as I never had any intention of setting out to amass a record bank balance. Convinced that I would be happy enough to sing for a modest reward, I had little hesitation in burning my boats and facing all the vicissitudes and heartbreaks which seem to go hand in hand with a prima donna's professional existence.

II

MY FIRST SONGS

IT was a school friend of Kirsten Flagstad who first made me conscious of the beauty of music and the fact that I had a voice and wanted to use it. She was a Norwegian soprano by the name of Gerda Westerlund, who left her native Oslo to seek fame in foreign lands. For some time she stayed with us in London and eventually made her way to the United States.

I was only a child of four at the time and cannot pretend that at so tender an age I was destined to sing Butterfly at Covent Garden. My beginnings were not as spectacular as those of Patti, who, as a child of seven, stood on a table on the platform of Tripler's Hall in New York and sang "by ear" the elaborate "Casta Diva" from Bellini's *Norma*. She became overnight the most phenomenal of all child prodigies, and I imagine she still holds the record. I did not begin as a prodigy. During her stay with us Madame Westerlund would go into the drawing-room every morning about eleven o'clock and, after carefully closing the door, she would sit at the piano and trill away at her scales. I used to stand outside the door, entranced by the sound. I had never heard such glorious high notes. I imagined them to be like the nightingale in Hans Andersen's fairy story. I wanted to copy her, so I used to echo the scales as I stood on the mat outside, much to the amusement of the family. That was my first indication of wanting to sing. I cannot claim that I swore, there and then, to become a prima donna, because I was too young in those days even to realise that people sang for a living. It was sufficient that I revelled in the sound of Madame Westerlund's

crystal-clear voice, especially when she sang Grieg's plaintive song "To the Spring" and his melodious "Ich liebe Dich". I knew that I should enjoy making sounds like those and hoped that one day I might be able to do so.

There were no musicians in our family. My father was a hair-dresser and rather proud of numbering Miles Malleeson, then a promising young actor and dramatist, among his clients. My mother loved music, especially the work of the German masters, but neither of my parents had any connection with the professional side of musical life. Flagstad, at the age of ten, taught herself the rôle of Elsa in *Lohengrin* and then followed it up with *Aïda*. There was nothing like that about me. I might have taken an interest in such studies if the scores had come my way. Flagstad had them at her elbow, as her father was an orchestral conductor and her mother a pianist and opera coach, so at home she lived in an atmosphere of music.

When the time came I was packed off to Hendon Convent to be educated by the nuns. I used to look forward to the music lesson and enjoyed singing in two-part songs, becoming rather proud of myself through being able to keep the second line going, without straying off into the melody. The other girls seemed to find it rather difficult and on one occasion I remember the exasperated Sister saying, "Now all do it without Victoria!"

I became a quick sight-reader while at the convent, and as music seemed to come fairly easily and gave me such pleasure my parents arranged for me to study the piano and the fiddle. I spent every spare minute at the piano, not because I had any thought of music as a career but because I enjoyed singing better than playing hockey or other games. More than anything I enjoyed singing the songs of Schubert and Brahms. I particularly loved the Brahms "Wiegenlied", which was my favourite until I went to a recital given by Elena Gerhardt and heard her sing "Der Wegweiser" by Schubert, that irresistible song about the sign-post. That wonderful moment led to my discovery of *Die Winterreise*, the winter journey song cycle of which the Sign-post

Song is a part. For a time *Die Winterreise* became my Bible. I sang the songs over and over again, not because the sentiments expressed in them were particularly suitable to a schoolgirl, but because the beauty of the music appealed to me more strongly than anything I had ever heard before. I knew nothing about interpretation in those days, and in some instances I must have murdered those little masterpieces, but as I only sang them for my own enjoyment in the solitude of our drawing-room, no listener was asked to suffer. Though they were really far too complex and difficult for my immature voice and technique, they gave me wonderful insight into the score. I seemed to get close to Schubert and appreciated the feelings he must have experienced at the time he wrote the music. "Die Krähe" was a rare gem and I delighted in the picture of the man leaving the town for the winter countryside, being shadowed by a carrion crow, hovering in the sky in readiness to pounce on his victim. It was an odd taste for a young girl, but it gripped my imagination so vividly that I thought it the most wonderful song ever written, and the Wilhelm Müller poem which Schubert set to music won a special place in my affection. "Der Leiermann", the pathetic song about the hurdy-gurdy man, with its vivid tinkling accompaniment, was another cherished memory from *Die Winterreise*. It used to bring tears to my eyes, as I dwelt on the plaintive word-picture of that lonely old man with the droning instrument which was his only friend and sole source of existence.

Many of the songs in this cycle are essentially masculine in outlook and sentiment, as they reflect various aspects of a man making the winter journey of his life. One song expresses the exhilaration of snowflakes being blown in the face, and elsewhere the singer, believing himself to be a god, revels in his fight against storm and tempest. I still sing these songs at home for my own pleasure, but would never dream of including them in a recital programme. They are so essentially written for a man that I would prefer to hear them sung by Herbert Janssen or Alexander Kipnis than by a woman. To hear Elena Gerhardt

sing them is, of course, one of the great musical experiences of our time, but since becoming a professional singer myself I have developed a distaste for singing love songs addressed to women, marching songs and other pieces of music obviously designed for male singers.

"The Erl King" fascinated me at this time, being really a subject for grand opera, condensed into the mould of a single song, demanding three distinct voices, that of the father, the son and the Erl King himself. As all three characters are men, I realise now how much more effective the song can be when sung by a rich baritone voice, yet for all that it has an irresistible fascination for women singers. Lotte Lehmann, Elisabeth Schumann, Maria Jeritza, Marta Fuchs, Sigrid Onegin and Ernestine Schumann-Heink constantly sang "The Erl King" at their concerts. The song taught me a valuable lesson about lieder. Because the range of these Schubert songs is not particularly wide, many singers think them easy and well within their scope. "The Erl King" brought home to me the fact that lieder singing is practically a life-long study in itself. Quite apart from the musicianship demanded, the singer must have a wide outlook on life as well as a keen insight into human character. There are more characterisations in *Die Winterreise* than in any opera I know. Each song brings a new personality under review—a full-length portrait as detailed and alive as a short story by O. Henry. As a schoolgirl I was quick to sense that lieder demanded far more than singing the notes written by the composer. To-day I am constantly being asked to give lieder recitals, but I have to refuse because I cannot find sufficient time to devote to the preparation of the programme. To do justice to a lieder recital I should need to work for six months on a selection of songs by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and possibly Hugo Wolf. With heavy commitments in opera and on the air, and long-standing concert engagements in the provinces, I find it quite impossible to devote six long months to studying the German masters and perfecting such a programme.

As my father died when I was in my mid-teens, I had to think about earning some money to help my mother and sister to keep the home together. I never thought seriously about becoming a singer, and in any case my voice was then too immature and undeveloped to use as a means of livelihood, quite apart from the fact that it was still untrained. The obvious course was to go to Pitman's College in order to become a secretary. Singing was pushed reluctantly into the background while I concentrated upon shorthand and typing. I held my own with the other girls, and after passing the necessary examinations I took various secretarial jobs, including one with the Klangfilm organisation, where, in addition to my shorthand-typing duties, I used to translate letters from the German at the English headquarters of this German film company in London. I still had no burning ambition to become a prima donna. I was happy enough at the office. The work was varied and well within my scope. My colleagues were pleasant to work with. The hours were not killing and the pay was good for the duties expected of me, so I resigned myself to a clerical job for the rest of my life. I was regarded as efficient in my own department and managed to inspire a sense of loyalty in those girls who worked under me, so I felt capable of accepting any advancement the commercial world offered me, and was confident of being able to hold my own.

I was earning enough money as a secretary to be able to pay for some private singing lessons. I had to arrange to see my teacher in the evening, after the office, or on Saturday afternoons, my only free time. I used to practise at home, but had no experience of singing in public. There were times when I would have liked to have sung a few simple ballads to a group of people, just to try the effect of my voice upon them. A proper concert was, of course, out of the question, as I had only just begun to learn my craft. What I really wanted was a dinner engagement, a Masonic banquet or an association dinner at which I could sing two or three bright songs to break up a series of otherwise interminable

after-dinner speeches. Unfortunately I had not the opportunity of putting my powers to the test, as at that time we rarely met people who might have put such work in my way. So I had to be content to sing at home and to my teacher.

My teacher, who was training me as a mezzo-soprano, was so pleased with my progress that he urged me to compete for a scholarship in order to take up serious musical studies at Trinity College of Music. I decided to go in for it, not so much with the idea of winning it as of discovering where I stood in the open field, side by side with other students of my own age. I won the scholarship, which was all very gratifying, as it proved that I had not been wasting my leisure, but the real significance of this little triumph lay in bringing me to a parting of the ways. Confident that I had a future as a professional singer, my teacher said that I would be foolish not to give up my commercial job and take a full-time course at Trinity College, with a view to earning a living by music. It presented a disturbing decision. The office job was quite well paid in its way and we were managing quite comfortably at home. I felt a little scared about throwing it all up for a career that might well end in smoke. Singers with finer voices than mine had starved in their garrets. Finally my mother wisely made up my mind for me. She suggested that I should leave the office and take a chance. She knew that I would be much happier singing than typing business letters, so she urged me to give it a trial. By way of comfort, she wisely observed that I could always go back to the commercial world if impresarios had no time for me as a singer. Her view of the entire situation convinced me that I had everything to gain and nothing to lose, as I could always pick up the threads of my commercial life where I had dropped them. So I took an affectionate farewell of my office friends and became a full-time scholar at Trinity College, where I remained for two and a half years.

I was not too happy about my voice at Trinity College. It was still being trained as a mezzo, but I had a suspicion that I ought

to be a soprano and wanted my teachers to do something about it. They were convinced that I was a true mezzo and refused to force my voice, so I had to content myself with the prospect of singing alto parts in oratorio and giving lieder recitals. I hardly imagined that there would be a full-time living in such a career, as oratorio is not in demand all the year round, and there is a limit to the number of lieder recitals a singer can give in the course of a season. Towards the end of my stay at Trinity College I grew more discontented, feeling that I was making little or no progress. My mother sensed my disappointment, but suggested that, by way of a final gamble, I might go abroad for additional study, before deciding to abandon the idea of becoming a professional singer and returning to commercial life. Having worked out a budget and found that such a scheme could be managed on an economic basis, I wrote to two famous singers for advice.

One was Lotte Lehmann, the other the great Russian bass, Alexander Kipnis. Lehmann sent an early and a gracious reply; Kipnis remained silent. In her letter Lehmann suggested that I should contact Madame Kaszowska, a highly respected authority on singing, who spent most of the year in Vienna, but came to London to give courses for a couple of months each summer. I met Madame Kaszowska and she was kind enough to hear me sing. She was impressed by my voice and as I had already set my heart upon going abroad, she thought I ought to go to Vienna to study under her chief assistant, Madame Mendl. I started a correspondence with Madame Mendl, but at the same time I was in touch with Professor Grenzebach in Berlin and could not make up my mind which teacher to choose. I was inclined to look a little more favourably upon Berlin, as it happened to be nearer home.

At this stage of indecision a delightful letter arrived from Alexander Kipnis. It was written on the boat going to Buenos Aires. While searching through some music in preparation for his first concert in the Argentine my letter slipped out from between the pages of a score. It was then many weeks old and

MY FIRST SONGS

he had forgotten all about it, though he fully intended to reply at the time he received it. Apologising for having so carelessly mislaid the letter, he asked to be forgiven, and then went on to say that I could not do better than go to Berlin and study under Professor Grenzsbach, to whom he owed so much himself. There was no more to be said. Mother agreed, and in preference to Vienna I went to Berlin for what proved to be the most fruitful eighteen months of my student days.

III

FINISHING SCHOOL

HITLER had been in power for over a year when I took up residence in Berlin. I heard much about the changing way of life, as well as whispered accounts of the horrors of the concentration camps. It was rather disturbing, but I felt that there was little I could do about it. Not being interested in politics, even at home, I tried to avoid being drawn into arguments about the Third Reich, and turned all my attention to music.

I concentrated upon the tuition of Professor Ernst Grenzebach. As soon as he heard my voice he decided that I was a soprano and insisted that I should sing arias which had been forbidden by my tutors in London. He placed my voice as a true soprano, and after about a year's study suggested that I should give a recital in Berlin at the Bechsteinsaal. We worked together on a lieder programme and I was favourably received by the critics. One hailed me as "an excellent soprano", while another expressed a desire to hear more of me.

After the concert I was approached by Paul Weihrauch, a schoolmaster who had written some very fine songs of the lieder type. I was most encouraged to learn that he considered my voice an ideal vehicle for the interpretation of his compositions. He was so keen for the critics to hear his songs sung by me that he asked if I would take part in a joint recital of his works with a baritone friend of his. I naturally leapt at the idea, encouraged to know that my first recital had led to so interesting a contact. My hard work on the Paul Weihrauch lieder gave me considerable

satisfaction when the public performance was well received at the Singakademie in Berlin.

Once again the Press was most kind and helpful. I shall always be grateful to those German critics for the constructive opinions they offered on my work. I used to follow their criticisms very closely, always reading reviews of performances I had attended myself. At the Staatsoper I heard the great Elisabeth Rethberg, Maria Müller, Friedrich Schorr, Herbert Janssen, Jan Kiepura and Max Lorenz. It was my good fortune to attend a complete cycle of *Der Ring* with Frida Leider as Brünnhilde, to hear Gigli and Viorica Ursuleac in *La Tosca*. I also heard Dusolina Giannini as Aïda, and was lucky enough to see a wonderful performance of *Parsifal* and another of *Die Meistersinger*. On each of these occasions the Press comments were most illuminating, as the performances had obviously been attended by critics who had stayed from start to finish and were anxious to make some really significant remarks upon the musical experience they had either enjoyed or not, as the case might be.

It is a pity that newspapers in London are so short-staffed that they expect one critic to attend two or more concerts on the same evening. It is hard for a singer to be judged solely on one group of songs, particularly if it happens to be the first in her programme. She will probably be feeling at her most nervous as she opens the evening and her voice will not have warmed up. She may even make a slip, which will be rightly exposed by the critic. If he leaves at that point, his opinion may not be very favourable when it appears in print the next day, but if he stays on he may hear the singer's notes take on a new beauty as she gains confidence, with her voice warming up after the first two or three arias. She may so bewitch him with her artistry in the later groups that he will be tempted to forget the nervous slip she made as the programme opened. He will write a far more favourable notice than if he had left earlier. The artist will be able to benefit from what he writes and the public will be able to form a very much truer conception of the singer's artistic worth.

Surely the singer deserves to be judged on her entire performance, just as the actor must be seen in all the different scenes of a play before one can attempt to pass an opinion on his performance. It is heart-breaking for a singer to come on for her second group, only to discover that the Press seats are all empty, because the critics have had to slip away *en masse* to hear a concerto at another concert hall. One cannot blame them. If their editors demand criticisms of two simultaneous performances, what can they do?

I was delighted with my progress in Berlin, where I received encouragement on all sides, though I soon realised that I should have to devote my entire life to learning. It would never be possible to rest on my laurels, no matter what personal successes lay ahead. I also realised that when I returned to England it would be necessary to discover a maestro to whom I could go from time to time to study new works and to seek advice about any faults or mannerisms that might creep into my interpretations. A permanent teacher would be an essential guide, philosopher and friend. Meantime I was anxious for the English public to hear me as soon as possible, and wrote home from Berlin, asking my mother to book the Wigmore Hall and make all necessary arrangements for my first recital.

I had reached my mid-twenties and felt that my voice had matured, even though it had not developed to its fullest extent. That could not be expected until I had sung more frequently in public and gained more experience of what I call "bigger" music—heavy oratorio and operatic rôles which I hoped might come my way. I left Berlin full of high hopes and confident that I would make a good impression at my first London recital. I felt rather like a star pupil ready to show off her talents at an end-of-term concert, but in this case I hoped to impress people more influential than an adoring parent and a host of well-wishing friends.

Most of the preparation for my Wigmore Hall recital was done before I left Berlin, under the guidance of Professor Grenzbach.

He gave me the assistance I needed with the interpretation of the lieder, which I proceeded to polish until they met with his approval. In the actual choice of songs I had invaluable help from Else Prausnitz, a very fine accompanist and coach who worked with Professor Grenzebach. She seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of classical songs, not only in German, but in French, Italian and English. She even knew a score or two of delightful songs by American composers of note. She impressed upon me the necessity of choosing a programme that would appear attractive, on its own account. "Think of the poor critics," she said, "going to concerts night after night, year after year, and hearing the same lieder over and over again. How can you expect to stimulate them if you make no effort to discover something with a new interest?"

So, on Fräulein Prausnitz's suggestion, I decided to devote the first part of my programme to a rarely heard solo cantata by Handel entitled "Lucrezia". Consisting of eighteen pages of florid, declamatory and legato music, it took about twelve minutes to sing, and was recommended by Fräulein Prausnitz because it was highly dramatic in the Italian style and proved an ideal showpiece for my particular talents. It was a plea by Lucrece to the eternal gods to reduce her betrayer, Tarquin, to ashes. At first we considered letting this Handel aria stand alone to form the entire first part. Then we gave the late-comers a thought. We decided something ought to precede it in case the unpunctual ones were prevented from entering the hall. We could not run the risk of their missing the entire performance of this Lucrece aria, which I was so proud of having "discovered". So I chose two early English songs to open the first group, "Come Again" by John Dowland, from the *First Book of Ayres*, published in 1597, and "The Wakeful Nightingale" by the seventeenth-century composer, John Weldon.

Then, by way of contrast for the next group, we decided upon half a dozen Hugo Wolf songs, so essentially German in style. I was fascinated by his lieder because the music always mirrored

the sense to perfection, as he seemed to get his musical inspiration from the sound of the words. Joseph Marx said, when discussing Hugo Wolf's songs: "As Wolf's piano part is not an 'accompaniment' in the usual sense of the word, but rather a wonderful and tender joint creation of the musical theme, the pianist should not murmur and accompany inaudibly, but actually go along with the singer and stand out if necessary in places where the vocal part is equal with the piano, and not endanger the harmonic clarity of the composition by using too much discretion."

When I first saw a portrait of Hugo Wolf in Berlin I found his melancholy expression as irresistible as the sadness of a Chekhov play, and when I came to know his music I found it equally absorbing. Four out of the six lieder I chose for my recital were poems of tragic reflection. In "Über Nacht, über Nacht" the singer waits for the dawn with tears of anguish and sorrow; "Das verlassene Mägdlein" is no happier, telling of a maiden with so heavy a heart that she wishes the day were over, even before it dawns. There is a bitterness about "Wer rief Dich denn?" as the jilted girl cries to her lover to go back to the rival he deemed more fair. "Rat einer Alten" advises a young lass to keep her sweetheart fast in love and respect, while "Anakreons Grab" is a tender setting of Goethe's poem concerning the tomb of the poet who loved through spring, summer and autumn. Finally I rounded off the Hugo Wolf group with "Selbstgeständis", one of his happiest songs about an only child who had been petted six times as much as she would have been had she been one of a family of six.

As my interpretation of Max Reger's songs had been much admired in Berlin I devoted my next group to his work. The "Maria Wiegenlied" was the only one really familiar to English audiences. The others were "Amselliedchen", in which the blackbird tries to comfort a foolish woman; "Mein Traum", dedicated to a beautiful dream that clouds the days with bitter tears; "Frühlingsmorgen" which suggests the glory of a spring sunrise, and, finally "Mein Schätzelein ist ein gar köstliches

PLATE III



Principal Boy in Pantomime—ROBINSON CRUSOE

PLATE IV



Offenbach's LA BELLE HELENE—my first experience of opera, at the Strand Theatre, London

Ding'', a lighthearted song about a little treasure who drives all care, sorrow and pain from the house.

My last group was dedicated to the work of later German composers, Joseph Haas, Richard Trunk and Paul Weihrauch, whose lieder I had sung in Berlin at his own request. I seem to have been particularly attracted by songs of grief at this time, for Paul Weihrauch's "Du" had a couplet:

Each night my pillow
Is wet with my weeping!

After so many tears, I took leave from my audience on a bright note with Richard Trunk's setting of a poem entitled "Frühlingssonne", the last verse of which gave me a chance to sing,

Yet 'tis time for joy and gladness,
Sun, by thy beams dispel my sadness,
Smile on me, with joy sublime
Glad my heart, while yet 'tis time!

It was a rather solid programme devoted almost exclusively to German lieder. Nowadays it seems to have become the custom to have only one or two groups of German songs and to include French and possibly English works in the same programme. German lieder were not sung very much during the war years, possibly because German was an enemy language at that time, and the tendency is still with us to a certain extent. At my recital we decided to have the German words and the translation printed side by side on the programme, as so many people like to follow the artist as she sings poems by Goethe or Eduard Mörike, and those unfamiliar with foreign languages like to know the gist of the song to which they are listening. For the same reason I think singers should always announce the titles of their encores. It is infuriating to hear someone sing a lovely song at the end of a recital and not to know the title. We arranged the lieder in chronological order, as music-lovers prefer listening

to them that way. There is no reason why a singer should not start with a song written last week and finish her programme with one of Henry VIII's love ditties, yet most people seem to get more enjoyment from hearing the earlier songs first.

My sister, Lily, looked after the secretarial side of the recital. She wrote endless letters to agents, in the hope of inducing them to come and hear me sing. The main reason for giving the concert was to interest such people in my work, so that they might offer me engagements for oratorios and miscellaneous concerts. I had no thought of opera when I first went to Germany, as I was still regarded as a mezzo and I seemed to think at that time that there was more chance for such a voice in concert work. On that account I had made a study of oratorio rather than opera. Lily took a note of the name of every agent who appeared in the concert announcements in the *Daily Telegraph* and wrote to them all, enclosing a pair of complimentary tickets. We sent some tickets to Lady Snowden, who had encouraged me at a students' concert before I went to Germany, and we asked Lady George Cholmondeley, who was devoted to music and had previously expressed a desire to help me in any way she could. Lily suddenly thought about Sir Henry J. Wood. At first I laughed at the idea, until I could see that she was quite serious in her suggestion.

After all, I had won a scholarship to Trinity College and had taken the trouble to study for eighteen months in Germany, so I could hardly be regarded as a dilettante. We knew that Sir Henry was a very busy man, but we sat down and composed a carefully phrased letter to him. Lily knew just how much a kind word from so famous a musician would mean to me on the brink of my career, when a little encouragement went a long way. We sent him two tickets, saying that we were fully aware of his heavy professional commitments. We inferred that we hardly expected him to be able to attend himself, but made it clear that we would be tremendously grateful if he could arrange for someone to come on his behalf and give an opinion on my

work. I was a little discouraged when the tickets were returned some days before the recital, with a letter to the effect that Sir Henry would be pleased to give me half a dozen lessons at a fee of two guineas each, or would arrange an audition on payment of three guineas.

For my recital I had the good fortune to obtain the services of Gerald Moore at the piano. We had two rehearsals, and instantly I realised the wonderful experience of working with so sensitive a musician. He plays in such a way that the voice seems to float on top of the accompaniment and he knows the music so well that, instead of following the singer, he seems to take her along with him. I had the same experience a few years later when he played some Hugo Wolf accompaniments for me at the National Gallery during the war. At the end of my first group at the Wigmore Hall, when I had just finished the major task of singing Handel's "Lucrezia", Mr. Moore kissed me on both cheeks and whispered that I was singing like an angel. He may or may not have been right, but it was delightful to hear those stimulating words in the middle of such an ordeal. I shall always be grateful to him for that moment, quite apart from the inspiration of his masterly playing.

The next day, surrounded by the gay floral tributes my friends had sent along to the hall, I sat at home and read the criticisms, which suggested that I had a clear soprano voice, and knew how to present my material with ease and grace. My general reception in the Press was what might be called "middling", not nearly so helpful as my Berlin criticisms had been. In spite of that, I hoped some offers of engagements might present themselves within a day or two. Meantime Lily and I went into the financial aspect of the recital. We discovered that it had cost £70, with the hire of the hall, the printing, the postage and other odds and ends. We managed to get £30 from the sale of tickets and programmes, so I went along to the post office and drew out my last £40 to cover the difference. Though not in debt, I was eager for an early offer, as there was no longer any lump sum at the bank to

breed that glorious feeling of security. Days, weeks, and eventually months went by without so much as a letter or a telephone enquiry. My faith began to wear a little thin. In all modesty I think I can say that I need not have been ashamed of the recital I gave. Yet I failed to stir so much as a glimmer of interest.

How could I ever hope to get myself heard by those who promoted concerts? There was no more money to spend on another recital, or on audition fees to learn what musical celebrities thought of my voice. My mother used to quote Mr. Asquith's popular slogan, "Wait and see", but there was a limit to my patience and it seemed to me quite useless to go on waiting at home, when no one seemed aware of my existence as a concert artist.

IV

FACING THE PUBLIC

I CANNOT pretend that I was not bitterly disappointed at the negative response to my Wigmore Hall recital. My voice sounded better than it had ever done and I had greater mastery over it. The applause had been so enthusiastic that I could sense it meant more than the kind encouragement of friends. Yet nothing happened at all. I enjoyed an isolation which Greta Garbo might have envied. What was to be done? Perhaps I did not know what the public wanted. Maybe I was too remote from those music-lovers who paid to hear singers. I ought to try and find out what they liked and why certain artists were in demand while others, like myself, sat at home in an empty drawing-room and sang at the piano.

I fondly imagined that I knew something about public taste, as I attended concerts regularly and even in my student days I had gained some contact with musical audiences in London. All artists are nervous on the platform, but I had felt surprisingly at home facing my first crowded hall, when I gave a lieder recital at Trinity College while still a student there. Though I was nervous, I think I managed to cover it up, so that no one can say that I looked ill at ease. Later I took part in a students' concert at Queen's Hall and was singled out to appear at a Patrons' Fund concert at the Royal College of Music in Kensington. All these audiences consisted of rather polite music-lovers, not drawn from the vast population of theatre-goers who kept opera and the lighter forms of musical entertainment alive. I met these

men-and-women-in-the-street for the first time during one of the long vacations, while still at Trinity College.

A pseudo-Hungarian band advertised a two weeks' engagement for a vocalist. Though still a student, I presented myself for an audition and secured a contract to appear in costume with the band, singing "My Hero" from *The Chocolate Soldier*, twice nightly in Glasgow and Coventry. It was a curious set-up, as most of the boys in the band knew so little about Hungary that they could hardly have found it on the map. However, the idea was for them to try to look like gipsies from the banks of the Danube and perform their music against a colourful backcloth, bathed in romantic moonlight. Wild bravos greeted each number, as well as the finale in the form of a spectacular castanet number, executed in red-heeled shoes by Consuelo Carmona, a dancer from Barcelona who had studied with the great Argentina in Paris. I had to sit with the band, dressed in a scarlet costume, with red Cossack boots to match. A cluster of red roses adorned my golden hair, which seemed quite out of place on the head of a gipsy. I mentioned it to someone in authority, who assured me that there were gipsies in Hungary with corn-coloured hair, so I made no further protest. I resigned myself to sitting among the boys and pretending to play a zither until called out to sing my number. Not a sound came out of my instrument, but I went through the motions of playing it with such conviction that one of the Glasgow critics singled me out for praise and said that he would like to hear more of my playing! I began to think that I was an actress of no mean achievement! I had never previously worn a stage make-up nor had any instruction in the application of greasepaint. Carmona told me which colours to buy and showed me how to apply them. She said that as long as I always had a good smooth foundation and clearly defined eyes nothing else mattered very much. I have followed her advice ever since, using it as the basis for all the facial transformations demanded by my subsequent operatic rôles. After making myself look more

like a gipsy than any Spanish sherry advertisement, I was ready for the fray.

The week in Glasgow taught me a good deal about the likes and dislikes of music-hall audiences. I was fascinated by the manner in which the various acts were presented, all designed to evoke the maximum amount of applause. The raising of the lights as a singer took her top note above an orchestra playing fortissimo obviously earned far more applause than the artist would have received singing the same song in the sombre setting of the Wigmore Hall. These tricks of the trade intrigued me and I enjoyed standing in the wings before and after our own performance to watch the comedians, the adagio dancers and the trick cyclists holding their own with such skill. I realised that more is expected of a vocalist than the knowledge of how to sing her songs. She also has to know how to present them if she hopes to excite that blasé music-hall audience, who sees ten or a dozen different acts every week of the year.

I soon discovered there were other lessons waiting to be learned outside the theatre. We arrived in Coventry on a sweltering Sunday, the day before August Bank Holiday, when all the landladies appeared to be out for the day. I was rather worried about having nowhere to sleep. Carmona quelled my fears. She was an old hand at looking for theatrical digs and said I could go round with her and stay in the same house if that would make me any happier. I jumped at the idea. We saw some ghastly rooms which gave the impression of accommodating vermin as well as "theatricals". We could only afford to pay 35s. "all in", so that rather limited the quarter of the city in which we were able to make enquiries. Finally we struck a house which appeared to have fewer disadvantages than the others we had seen. It was not too far from the theatre, which meant that we could save on our fares, and the landlady said she was a good cook. We had to take her word for it, but we were too exhausted by the heat to be "choosy", and so we accepted her terms and moved in. I did not care for the pattern of the

wallpaper in the bedroom, nor for the yellow artificial roses which had been so long harbouring dust on the mantelpiece. I complained to Carmona about the bath, which had not been scoured for weeks. "You can't expect the Ritz for 35s. a week," she sighed, with a suggestion of exasperation in her voice. "You have lived too long at home where everything has been done for your comfort. It will do you good to rough it on tour for a bit. You can do without a bath to-night. Rub yourself down with my eau de Cologne and in the morning we'll go out and buy a tin of cleansing powder and a mop. Remember that you are being paid to entertain people like the woman who runs this house, so you are getting valuable experience through living under the same roof. You will understand the public so much better by mixing with them."

Carmona was right. After only two weeks on the road I went back to London a wiser student of life and a more experienced artist.

I recalled the Hungarian band after the fiasco of the Wigmore Hall recital and wondered if I ought to offer my services to a similar vaudeville attraction touring the halls. It would be excellent experience and I could be earning a salary at the same time. Better that than sitting at home wallowing in self-pity and waiting for the miracle of hearing the director of Covent Garden telephoning to ask me to sing Tosca. Someone suggested that I should go to Feldman's, the music publishers in Shaftesbury Avenue, to see Frank Rubens. He had his fingers on the most popular songs of the day and knew what was what, and who was who in the theatrical profession, at any rate as far as the provinces and music halls were concerned.

Forgetting all about Schubert and Brahms I went along to meet Mr. Rubens. He handed me one of his best-seller songs and asked me to sit at the piano in his office and sing it. He was beaming with appreciation as I finished.

"You have a very fine voice, my girl," was his verdict. "You leave it to me. I'll make a star of you."

I did not know quite what Mr. Rubens meant by a star, as I felt sure that he had never heard of *Die Winterreise* and the songs I really loved, but I was prepared to take a chance on his suggestions and see what happened. Music-hall singers used to come to Mr. Rubens in search of songs to "stop the show" in their touring revues and vaudeville bills. He would give them advice, having an uncanny flair for matching up an individual voice with the most suitable song. Promoters of road shows also came to Mr. Rubens and he often supplied them with young singers capable of "dressing" the stage and "bringing the house down" with a good top C. Mr. Rubens never charged his clients an agency fee. It was just part of his service and part of his method of publicising Feldman's songs. Eventually he hoped to leave the music publishing business and set up as an agent, but he died before realising his ambition.

Mr. Rubens strengthened my morale, being so enthusiastic about my work and insisting that my voice was a money-maker. There were times when he was more like a comic opera character than a music publisher. Often when I would slip in to see him he would hand me half a dozen songs and say: "Run through these for me, Victoria. I want to know how they sound when you sing them." I would sit at his office piano and embark upon a miniature recital. It was agreed that I should carry on, in spite of interruptions. When the phone rang, as it so often did, Mr. Rubens would pick it up, and without enquiring the name of the caller, he would say: "Hello, hello! Listen! This is Victoria Sladen singing the new ballad, 'I'll Sing You a Thousand Love Songs'." Then he would place the receiver on the top of the piano to act as a sort of microphone for the benefit of the person at the other end. In nine cases out of ten the caller had rung off by the time Mr. Rubens attempted to resume the conversation after my song. Some of these incidents were worthy of the Crazy Gang, but they were good for me, as Mr. Rubens was the first person in show business to have faith in me. It was all very well for professors of music to praise my accomplishments, but

I was beginning to wonder whether my gifts had any real commercial value. Mr. Rubens put my mind at rest. It was good to know that I would be able to keep the wolf from the door, even if I had to start by singing Haydn Wood's "Roses of Picardy" instead of Schubert's "Heidenröslein".

My first engagement was something in the nature of a Christmas present from Mr. Rubens. It was a contract to play the part of Principal Girl in *Robinson Crusoe* at the Portsmouth Coliseum during the 1936 pantomime season. I wondered what the Berlin music critics would have said, but I thought it would be a start, if nothing else. As I travelled down to Portsmouth for the first rehearsals I began to wonder if I had made a mistake, going into a theatrical production without having had a single lesson in acting. From previous pantomimes I had seen, I imagined that the Principal Girl would not make very heavy demands on my histrionic ability. I was engaged, first and foremost, as a singer. The management would be satisfied if I put over my songs to the general satisfaction of the audience, and I knew that I could readily execute the type of numbers they would be likely to give me. I could easily hold my own on the vocal side and felt that the use of a little common sense ought to see me through the dramatic scenes in the show. When I met the cast of seasoned actors and actresses I did not feel particularly nervous, as they were most helpful, giving me tips on make-up and stage movement. I had two solos in the show. One was called "My Heart is Full of Sunshine", a number Mr. Rubens was most anxious to popularise, and the other was "Just Say Aloha", featured in the Desert Island scene. I was presented in an Hawaiian setting, dressed in a straw skirt and hung with garlands of exotic flowers. I would not have missed the engagement for anything. It was magnificent experience and gave me confidence to accept my first operatic part six years later without any hesitation.

I returned to London after the pantomime and paid my respects to Mr. Rubens. There was still no suggestion of any work from

the people who organised the presentation of serious music so, on the advice of Mr. Rubens, I decided to stay in the theatre. "You can get plenty of work," he said, "with a voice like yours. They like your blonde hair and you have a good figure. Don't be in a hurry to become a prima donna. You are still young. There is plenty of time, so go out on the road and get to know more about the public and your job. You will never regret it." I am glad I acted upon those words of wisdom, as my decision to stay in the commercial theatre helped my operatic career by teaching me the rudiments of stagecraft. As Whitsuntide approached, Mr. Rubens urged me to take a job in a concert party at Clacton, saying that it would offer me far more scope than pantomime, at the same time indicating how pleasant it would be to spend the entire summer by the sea. As usual, Mr. Rubens was right.

The engagement was most satisfactory and when the season came to an end in the autumn I was put in touch with a touring revue manager, looking for a soprano to strengthen the musical side of his show with one or two "spot numbers". I accepted the job and toured a succession of godforsaken "number two" towns on the theatrical circuit, but I was happy enough, earning sufficient to pay my way and to save a little each week towards some good lessons when I could find a suitable teacher.

The following Christmas, with some of my revue colleagues, I was in pantomime at the Granada, Shrewsbury, playing Alice Fitzwarren in *Dick Whittington*. For the next few years my professional life was cut to more or less the same pattern—pantomime at Christmas, concert party in the summer and an odd touring show in between. After Shrewsbury we rejoined our revue and went back on the road. During the summer of 1938 I was the leading singer in a resident show at Bridlington, with a similar engagement at Blackpool in 1939. Following the outbreak of war I returned to London, and after singing at a few Masonic dinners and one or two insignificant concerts, I played Principal Girl in *Aladdin* at Chiswick Empire. I rounded off my

pantomime career in 1941 by playing Alice Fitzwarren again, this time at the Opera House in Cheltenham. If not singing an operatic rôle, I was at least appearing at an opera house!

I can never be sufficiently grateful to Mr. Rubens for persuading me to go into concert party. With my own high ambitions at that time, I secretly thought that it was a bit of a "come-down", but it gave me a wealth of experience which I could never have gained in any other way. Concert party offers singers in the theatre the same golden opportunity that a repertory training gives an actress on the legitimate stage. Before Sonia Dresdel became a West-End star in *Hedda Gabler* she spent six years in provincial repertory, a policy that enabled her to play 300 parts before she came to London. By no other means could she have played so many parts of such varying size, shape and sound in so short a space of time. Had she started off in London she might only have played six parts in six years and would thus have been infinitely poorer in experience. It was the same with me in concert party: I was expected to do a bit of everything, in addition to singing my numbers. I had to dance a few steps with the entire company for the opening and closing numbers of the show; I had to join in the concerted numbers, thus obtaining valuable experience for operatic ensembles at a later date; I had to play small parts in sketches and "feed" the comedian in such a manner that he scored a laugh every time. I learned more about timing than I had ever known before and realised how easily a good laugh can be killed when a line is said too quickly or too slowly after the one that has gone before. I learned to feel the pulse of the house and to treat each audience individually, as no two "houses" can ever be quite alike because they are never composed of exactly the same set of people. I came to know my own face as I had never known it before, seeing it so frequently in the make-up mirror while trying to make it resemble someone else's when playing small character parts in the sketches. While singing my own numbers I learned to exploit my appearance and personality to the fullest possible advantage.

One had to look one's best even with a limited and frequently improvised wardrobe.

A concert-party audience is one of the toughest propositions in the world. It needs a good deal of concentration to capture and maintain their undivided attention. In a way, they do not demand as much as a town audience for their money, being holiday-makers intent upon enjoying themselves. On that account, they are in a carefree mood when they arrive and might even treat the programme facetiously, especially if a dozen or so came together in a party. Then the young men frequently set out to show off in front of their newly acquired girl-friends by trying to be witty at the expense of the artists. One has to be ready for any emergency and know how to deal with it.

I think Bridlington offered me the most difficult of all my concert-party problems, as the hall had glass walls, which enabled the audience to see what was happening outside. During the very first week I had the misfortune to make my first entrance just as a ship passed close to the sea-wall at the side of the hall. Hardly a soul looked at me as I trilled a Strauss waltz. With eyes right, they were all gazing at a trawler returning to Grimsby. I was furious, not so much with the audience, as with myself. I felt that I should have been able to display sufficient magnetism to hold their attention; if my artistic capabilities could not compete with a rusty old trawler I could not hope to get very far. After that initial experience I used to hope that a ship would pass during my numbers, so that I could discover whether I was fighting a winning or a losing battle against outside attractions. Those Bridlington steamers convinced me that an artist must possess the ability to cast some sort of a spell over her audience if she really hopes to hold them. I do not mean that she has to mesmerise them, but she must make them feel that they dare not take their eyes off her.

One of my greatest triumphs at Bridlington was my impact with a landlady who did not believe in wasting time. She obviously cooked an evening meal for her boarders, which meant

that she had to snatch her own bit of pleasure in the afternoon. She attended one of our matinées on a day when she had decided to give her guests peas for dinner. So, to kill two birds with one stone she brought a bag of peas and proceeded to shell them into a kitchen bowl as she watched the show. The comedian was the first to spot the incident, and though he pointed a joke at her, it was like water on the proverbial duck's back, as she continued to open pod after pod. Then I came on to sing "Tales from the Vienna Woods" and decided that I would get her complete attention if I dropped dead in the effort. I directed my gaze towards her and sang the lilting waltz to her alone. The rest of the audience seemed to fade out of focus and all I saw was a sharp image of that little woman industriously shelling her peas. By the time I reached the second verse I observed that her rate of progress was slowing down. She looked up as I started the refrain and I greeted her glance with my most captivating smile. I am sure no one had looked so pleased to see her for years. Her hands fell into her lap out of sheer astonishment and a full pod rolled into the gangway, where it remained until I had taken the concluding top note. I returned to my dressing-room more than satisfied with my victory. I had held one person spellbound, which was quite exhilarating in its small way. I wondered how Bernhardt must have felt as she gripped an entire theatre in the hollow of her hand. I have to thank that Bridlington patron for giving me some idea of such an experience. It could never have been brought home to me so vividly in an ordinary theatre or concert hall, where audiences are not in the habit of shelling peas.

In Blackpool we used to play in the open air when it was really warm. Disciplining an audience under such conditions is no easy problem, as out of doors there always seems to be an element of restlessness. One needs a strong nerve to face these jocular holiday-makers, who must never be allowed to catch the artist off her guard. I used to sing the "Blue Danube" in that programme, dressed in what I considered a rather smart blue ensemble. Apparently it proved too dazzling for a gentleman in

the front row who cried "Blimey!" as I made my entrance. The effect of this remark, so totally unexpected, was to make me forget my words. Nothing could be done about it, as I never carried the music. Nor could I go off and make a second start. I sang anything that came into my head, fitting improvised nonsense lines to the music and purposely not concentrating upon clarity of diction. I always memorise my songs photographically, visualising a page of music at a time. Overhearing that remark caused the image of the first page to fade right out of my mind. When I reached the point where I turned the page all was well, as I could see the music again in my mind's eye and was able to sing the correct words. Such an experience is excellent training in keeping one's head. After my seaside seasons I began to feel that I knew how to deal with any emergency short of fire which might arise on the stage. All I longed for was the chance to sing rather more serious music than the popular ballads which I had sung by the score to good-hearted holiday-makers. I hated the idea of my life being devoted entirely to the lighter type of entertainment.

V

TURNING TO OPERA

I DROPPED my short correspondence with Madame Mendl soon after I left Trinity College and decided to study in Berlin instead of Vienna. There appeared to be no point in writing further letters, as our chances of meeting seemed so remote. While I was working in Berlin, Madame Mendl, unknown to me, came to live in London, but she made no move to contact me, as she naturally had far more important things to occupy her time. About four years passed by, and then, towards the end of 1940, when looking through her address book to make a list of people to whom she wished to send Christmas cards, she encountered my name. Wondering what had become of me, she scribbled a few lines. We met, and from that day she became my teacher and we are still working happily together.

I can almost say that I had the advantage of studying in both Berlin and Vienna. Madame Mendl had been closely attached to the Vienna State Opera and had taught a number of singers who won distinction there. When she heard my voice she was horrified to learn that I was singing popular songs in pantomime. For a moment I felt quite ashamed and I believe there was the suggestion of a blush on my cheeks. She insisted that I should sing in opera, as my voice was ideally suited to that particular medium.

At first I protested, which caused Madame Mendl great amusement. "I have never heard of such a thing," she laughed. "I spend all my life trying to prevent students with unsuitable voices from going into opera. Now I meet a girl born to be a

PLATE V



"Now I am happy!"—the love duet in MADAME BUTTERFLY with
Ivan Dixon at Sadler's Wells



“Death with honour is better than life with dishonour”—Butterfly
makes her fatal decision

prima donna and I have to push her on to the stage. It is fantastic!"

As gently and politely as I could, I tried to point out to Madame Mendl that she was no longer in Vienna. She was in London, where musical life functions along totally different lines. She said she knew all about that, and then continued to complain about my voice being wasted in so inferior a form of entertainment as pantomime. It was sacrilege, she said, and she would give me no rest until I took some active steps towards guiding my career along the right and proper channels.

It was all very well for Madame Mendl to suggest that I went in for opera, but it was far more easily said than done. It meant returning to the world of serious music, which was my ultimate ambition, of course, but it also meant facing the old difficulty of getting a hearing. Opportunities in opera are even more limited than in the concert world. At the moment there are only three major opera companies in this country, the Covent Garden Opera Company, the Sadler's Wells Opera Company and the Carl Rosa Opera Company. At the time I was trying to get a foothold the Covent Garden Company did not exist. There was no permanent company at the Royal Opera House before the war, when international seasons were a feature of every London summer. During the war the theatre became a dance hall and did not reopen with opera and ballet until 1946, when an additional opera company came into being. So I found myself faced with the same old problems that existed after the Wigmore Hall recital, except that the hope of making progress seemed slighter than ever.

It is far more difficult to get a start in the world of music than in the theatre. The country is peppered with repertory companies where the budding actress can gain invaluable experience in a variety of different parts before she attempts to make a serious mark in the West End. The would-be prima donna is frustrated at the outset, unless she can join one of the three opera companies. Even if she is lucky enough to be accepted by one

of them, her troubles are by no means over. She will probably have to start in the chorus, with a promise of small parts later on. These small parts in opera are not such useful stepping-stones to success as the corresponding supporting parts in a play. On more than one occasion a vital actress has made her presence felt in a part of no more than a few lines, but a similar part in opera would hardly offer an artist the same opportunity to display her talents and she would be unlikely to attract the same degree of attention.

On the other hand, if the singer decides to devote her career to the concert platform, her prospects are poor unless she can afford to give a series of recitals in London. An isolated appearance, such as my Wigmore Hall concert, is useless, apart from being good for the singer's morale and self-confidence. I am convinced that recitals by an unknown singer bear no fruit unless she can give four or five in one season, thus keeping her name constantly before the public on posters and in newspaper advertisements. In this way, she stands a better chance of getting critics and agents to hear her, for if they cannot attend one recital they will probably go to another. The preparation of six different programmes gives her a magnificent chance to display her versatility and bring to light some fascinatingly unfamiliar works.

Before I went into pantomime I used to get depressed about the insignificant amount of money I had been able to earn by my voice, though I had already reached my mid-twenties. Girls of my own age who had taken other jobs seemed to be doing very well for themselves, always stylishly dressed and slipping over to the Continent for holidays, which alone cost more than I could hope to earn in the course of a year. Yet, on more sober reflection, I realised that things could not be otherwise in the life of a singer. Getting launched is a costly business for the best of them, unless, like Patti, they can pack a hall at the age of seven by singing "Casta Diva". Naturally several years of study are essential before a public appearance can be considered,

that is, a début which is to be taken seriously by concert-goers and music critics. By that time the artist will be twenty-four or twenty-five years old, mainly because her voice will not have developed earlier. She has to live, and unless she has some private means of her own, it entails relying upon her parents. Quick results are practically unknown in the music world, so the young singer and her family must be prepared to exercise patience and unshakable faith during the difficult threshold years.

I found these years a particularly busy time, being determined to gain all the experience I could. I went to every sort and kind of concert to broaden my musical knowledge. I realised it would be senseless to limit my concert-going to recitals by other sopranos, so I went to symphony concerts and heard the classics interpreted by Toscanini, Furtwängler, Weingartner and other conductors who were considered the greatest authorities of their day. I heard the most celebrated instrumentalists—Kreisler, Elman, Heifetz, Menuhin, Suggia, Casals, Pachmann, Rubinstein, Cortot, Backhaus and others—not only giving recitals, but playing the great concertos with our leading orchestras. It all helped to extend my musical knowledge and give me some idea of where the singer stood in the wider world of music. I attended recitals at the Wigmore Hall given by singers of both sexes, famous and obscure, and in this manner acquired a knowledge of style in singing and learned a good deal from the faults of others. With the help of the *Radio Times* I organised my listening-in during those student years. Every week I used to comb the publication very carefully, marking in red pencil any piece that I particularly wished to hear. Then I would glance at the paper each morning to make a note of the times at which my red letter items were being broadcast. My family used to laugh at this fuss over my listening, but it is the only way a music student can use the radio intelligently. Otherwise she is liable to make the infuriating discovery that the group of Grieg songs she particularly wanted to hear were sung half an hour before she switched on.

The radio helped me to become familiar with music I would never have heard otherwise, and now, with the coming of the more high-brow Third Programme, even more wonderful riches are at the disposal of the listener. The Victorian music student was denied this priceless means of acquiring a knowledge of style and interpretation, even if on occasions it only teaches us how *not* to do things.

From my earliest student years I realised that it would be a mistake to devote the whole of my leisure to listening to other musicians. I tried to get as much practical experience as I could in order to ensure that my first advertised appearance in public would not find me a complete novice in the art of walking on to a platform and facing a sea of expectant upturned faces. To familiarise myself with the feel of an audience, I accepted invitations to sing at concerts arranged by amateur music groups. At first I was disturbed and almost offended when a gentleman blew his nose loudly during the softer passages of Schubert's "Ave Maria", and I remember being annoyed with a woman in the front row for fanning herself incessantly with her programme in an over-heated hall. They both affected my singing because I allowed their behaviour to exasperate me. Afterwards I realised that I had much to learn if my singing could deteriorate on account of two such minor disturbances. I faced later audiences with a newly found confidence. I was ready for any emergency and it was gratifying to know that these appearances, in what my friends called "tin pot" halls, were teaching me something about my profession. They assured me that practical experience can do nothing but help a singer, and in the case of a student there is no reputation at stake, even if she does happen to make a slip. It is not going to prejudice her future engagements, nor is it going to be recorded in the *Daily Telegraph* the next morning. Only by adopting such a course can an artist acquire real knowledge of the stage. She can read an entire row of books on the subject and she can talk to a dozen celebrated artists, but she still has to face a live audience for herself.

I did not confine my experience to haunting the concert hall and the opera house. I went to the theatre as often as I could afford and saw the best productions of each season, whether they happened to be the classics, high comedy, farce, musical comedy or obscure experimental plays from the Continent. I still go to the theatre as often as my professional engagements permit, and still learn something from the actors. Any singer who appears in the powdered wig and crinoline rôles of the Mozart operas should have witnessed the performance of John Clements in *The Beaux' Stratagem*. I have never seen any actor make a flourish with such grace and dignity. His bow towards the ladies was an object lesson in the use of the hands and the position of the arms. I like to think that when I appeared as Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* after seeing Mr. Clements in Farquhar's artificial comedy, my acting acquired something in the way of elegance and significance.

Even the ballet should influence the prima donna intent upon making her stage performance compelling in beauty and convincing in characterisation. The pathos of Markova's Giselle or the gaiety of Fonteyn's Swanhilda in *Coppélia* are a revelation in the expressiveness of the human body without the aid of a single word.

Every time I met Madame Mendl I was nagged, in quite a pleasant way and entirely for my own good, about the necessity of getting into opera. My own efforts to rise to the higher planes of the profession had not met with much success, so it was left to Madame Mendl to find an opening for me. Early in 1942 George Kirsta, the painter and designer of stage décor, whom Madame Mendl had known in Vienna, was invited to produce *Tales of Hoffmann* together with an excerpt from Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* at the Strand Theatre. Kirsta informed Madame Mendl that he was looking for a soprano with a glamorous stage presence to sing the courtesan, Giulietta, in *Tales of Hoffmann*, and Helen in the excerpt from *La Belle Hélène* in which Paris presents

the apple to the fair rivals. Instantly Madame Mendl sensed that my big chance had arrived. I realised it, too, when the management heard me sing and offered me the part. I only hoped that the pantomime in which I was appearing in Cheltenham would terminate in time for me to rehearse the Offenbach operas in London. Madame Mendl said that my golden opportunity was at hand, and as her Viennese temperament rose to boiling point, she declared that I must leave the pantomime even if I had to walk out, and take my rightful place in opera, or I would regret it all my life.

I could not, of course, break faith with the Cheltenham management, but my troubles were settled for me by the pantomime closing two days before rehearsals started at the Strand Theatre. At last Madame Mendl was happy—and so was I!

All those years of stage experience in the provinces had not been wasted, as they gave me tremendous self-assurance when began to consider the acting possibilities of the rôle of Giulietta, the Venetian beauty who carelessly casts her eyes on Hoffmann. She only appears in the second act of the opera, but the character offers the singer an effective opportunity to depict the faithless woman, who is delighted when Hoffmann kills her elderly protector and thus clears the way for her to drift down the Grand Canal with her lover in a gondola, to the strains of the immortal Barcarolle.

As the opera was produced during the war years, it was thought that the evening should not end on the gloomy note of Hoffmann's disappointment in love, so, by way of a gay finale, we staged a scene from *La Belle Hélène*, which gave me another fine opportunity, both as singer and actress. The operas ran for eleven weeks at the Strand and then went on tour for a further six weeks, when Peter Pears took over the part of Hoffmann. My engagement proved, beyond doubt, that Madame Mendl had been right. I appeared to be suited to opera, my voice stood

TURNING TO OPERA

up to the strain and I found the work far more satisfying than I had expected. My previous experience of stage work enabled me to concentrate rather more fully upon the singing than if I had been a novice on the boards. I wanted some further rôles to follow Giulietta and Helen, but I saw no sign of them on the horizon as the curtain fell on the last night.

VI

MADAME BUTTERFLY

I COULD not afford to stay at home and wait until operatic engagements turned up. I had already learned my lesson after the Wigmore Hall recital, which effectively illustrated the truth of the old maxim that God helps those who help themselves. During the remainder of 1942 and part of 1943 I accepted some short concert tours arranged by C.E.M.A., the organisation which subsequently became known as the Arts Council. These tours were undertaken by a group of two or three musicians, who visited Army and Royal Air Force camps, factory canteens and suchlike places where it was thought that light classical music might give pleasure to the audiences in question.

On one of these tours I was associated with Percy Heming, the baritone, with whom I had previously sung in *Tales of Hoffmann*. He had been passionately devoted to grand opera all his life, and after hearing me in a dramatic aria at a works canteen concert he remarked that I had a suitable voice for *Butterfly*. He indicated that I ought to study the rôle, but I dismissed the idea, maintaining that life was far too short to learn a long part which I saw no chance of ever being able to sing in public.

Mr. Heming pointed out that occasionally he gathered singers together for casual productions of such operas as *Madame Butterfly* and *Hansel and Gretel*, touring them for a long enough period to make the study worth while. He never quite knew when such an opportunity might occur, but made it obvious that he would consider me for *Butterfly*. So on the strength of this

slender hope of production I procured a score of the opera and set about learning the title-rôle.

Butterfly turned out to be my first grand-opera part, being rather more serious and dramatic than the Offenbach parts I had played at the Strand Theatre. The character, that poor lonesome little thing, was my first love in opera, and even after singing it over 150 times, it still holds first place in my affection. Tosca, and Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, run it very closely, but I doubt if any other rôle will ever supplant Cho-Cho-San.

When I first decided to make a serious study of the part I realised that there was much that I could do alone, before I sought the guidance of Madame Mendl or anyone else about musical interpretation or the stage appearance of this Japanese heroine. I started by reading the libretto and familiarising myself with the plot, observing how Butterfly's part fitted into the general scheme of the story, paying particular attention to remarks other characters made about her, so that I could acquire the fullest possible knowledge of her character and personal background.

I was fascinated, too, by the manner in which the opera came into being. David Belasco wrote a short play entitled *Madame Butterfly*, from a magazine story by John Luther Long, and it was first seen in New York with Blanche Bates in the title-rôle at the Herald Square Theatre in March, 1900. The play shared the evening with a Belasco farce-comedy, *Naughty Anthony*. The Japanese play was an instantaneous success on Broadway, so Charles Frohman lost no time in bringing it to the Duke of York's Theatre in London, where Evelyn Millard was seen as Cho-Cho-San a month later. Francis Nielsen, at that time stage manager at Covent Garden, saw the makings of a wonderful opera in this short play, and urged Puccini to journey from Milan to London to see the production. The composer was so moved by the tragic story and by the pathos and tenderness of Miss Millard's interpretation, even though he knew no English, that he immediately commissioned Illica and Giacosa to write a

libretto on the subject. The play in which Miss Millard appeared consisted of what is now the second and third acts of the opera—Butterfly's life after her desertion by Pinkerton. So, to make a full-length opera, the librettists supplied an opening act, which explained Butterfly's tragic fate more fully, and gave Puccini superb scope to write the beautiful entrance music for his heroine and the passionate duet for the lovers which brings down the curtain on the first act.

Four years later the opera was produced unsuccessfully at La Scala, Milan, where it was withdrawn after a single performance, but was revised and received with tumultuous applause at Brescia only three months later. In 1905 Emmy Destinn created the rôle at Covent Garden with Caruso as Pinkerton and Scotti as Sharpless, and set the final seal of international success on Puccini's masterpiece. Learning how the opera came into being lent added interest to my studies.

Then I turned my attention to the music and played the entire score of the opera on the piano until I was genuinely familiar with it and could identify the context of any few bars that might be selected as a test and played to me. I was still away from London a good deal on my C.E.M.A. tours, but whenever I happened to be stationary in a town for a few days I would try to hire a studio and spend as much time as I could at the piano, making an intensive study of my own part in the opera. I also heard all the *Madame Butterfly* records that I could manage to acquire.

Some artists do not like to see others in parts which they themselves hope to play at a later date. Michael Redgrave, for instance, considers John Gielgud the finest Hamlet he has ever seen. He saw Gielgud play the part at the Old Vic in 1930 and is still haunted by the beauty of that performance after twenty years. Though Gielgud later appeared as the Prince of Denmark in the West End on four different occasions, Redgrave, hoping to play the part himself when an opportunity arose, purposely avoided seeing him, not wishing to be unduly influenced

by his colleague when his own turn came along. While I fully appreciate Redgrave's point of view, I do not practise his philosophy. I was curious to hear how other singers interpreted Cho-Cho-San. I dug out an old recording of "One Fine Day" which Emmy Destinn had made in 1916, and an even earlier one, made by Geraldine Farrar in 1909. I heard more recent recordings by Margaret Sheridan, Eva Turner, Joan Cross, Galli-Curci and Dusolina Giannini, as well as two renderings of the love duet by Caruso and Geraldine Farrar, and by Aureliano Pertile and Margaret Sheridan. I had no desire to copy any of these famous singers in my interpretation of the part. Cho-Cho-San was already a very real person in my imagination. I had very definite ideas about her character, her attitude to life and the people about her. I had the strength of will not to be swayed by the recordings I heard. There was much to admire in the singing of those earlier Butterflies, but some points were at variance with my own vivid conception of the character. I refused to change my idea because I did not see eye-to-eye with Emmy Destinn's reading of the part. It was not a question of one singer being right and the other wrong, but simply a case of two artists seeing the same part from a slightly different angle. I had built up my conception of Butterfly from a line-by-line combing of the libretto and a bar-by-bar analysis of the music. I had given a good deal of sincere and serious thought to the matter, so I felt it would be unfair to myself suddenly to change my front after hearing another prima donna sing the music. I never imagined that I knew better than distinguished predecessors, who had been acclaimed in the rôle in the most famous opera houses in the world. I merely felt that within the limits of my appreciation I should be happier singing the part in my own way, because I had very definite reasons for "seeing" the music as I did. On that account I was never tempted to make my interpretation a slavish copy of any other performance. I realised that if I ever had the good fortune to sing the part in a stage production, I should have to fall in with the wishes of the conductor and the

stage director, but there was a certain amount of thought behind the music which would be my own and which no one could influence, if I was to give what I considered an honest and sincere portrayal of the heroine as she lived in my imagination.

The question of Butterfly's appearance had to be considered. There were old photographs of Emmy Destinn smiling under a sunshade adorned with trailing blossom, and there was another of Rosina Buckman, using what I considered a very Western-looking hand-mirror and powder puff, as she posed for a picture of Butterfly at her toilet. I could not go into the question of costume, as I was not studying for any particular production of the opera, and if the chance to sing it ever came my way there was no knowing what kind of costumes would be provided by the management. Even so, I felt that I ought to learn something about the appearance of Japanese women, in order to make my stage appearance as authentic as possible. So as soon as I had a spell in London between my C.E.M.A. tours I spent some time contemplating the Japanese prints in the British Museum. They proved a mine of information and a real inspiration. By examining these exquisite works of art I gained some idea of how Japanese women placed their feet, how they held a closed fan with such grace and how they opened it to hide their faces so shyly behind it. I learned just how they placed their legs when they squatted on the floor, how they arranged flowers in their hair and the type of blooms they favoured for such adornment. I remembered that while Puccini was writing the music of *Madame Butterfly* he requested the Gramophone Company to record some native Japanese music in Tokio and he used these airs as a basis for the Oriental atmosphere which pervades the score. I felt that my research at the British Museum was the least I could do towards creating a convincing stage picture of the poor child.

For *Butterfly* is a child and I felt that the impression of her youth should dominate the opera from beginning to end, though there is a tremendous development of character as the story

unfolds itself. In the first act it is essential to point Butterfly's youth. If the prima donna is dainty and petite, so much the better, as she will find it easier to give the impression of a young girl madly in love. She looks up to Pinkerton as a demi-god, anxious to show her love for him in every possible way. In her simple life this union is something tremendous and she wants to be able to live up to it. She is so young and so inexperienced that doubts flutter across her mind from time to time, as she wonders whether she will be able to cope with the magnitude of the situation, which has caused her to be disowned by her family. She is accepted by neither the Japanese nor the Americans. Three or four times during the first act she sings "Now I am happy!" as she surrenders herself to a state which might be described as helpless happiness. Finally the surging music of the love duet, which closes the act, sweeps away any lingering doubts about her joy and the wisdom of taking so tremendous a step as to marry an American naval officer.

In the second act her pride is paramount. Poor little Butterfly has grown up in the three years that have passed by. It has not been an easy time, isolated from her people. Her servant, Suzuki, is her only friend as she realises the cruel consequences of being disowned by her own family and not accepted by the American colony in Nagasaki. Her child is her one interest and her only consolation as she struggles on in proud poverty. Three years of waiting, without a single word from her American husband, must have tried her faith and worn down her hopes, but if she ever secretly doubted his return, she never admitted it by so much as a glance. "One Fine Day", in which she reconstructs his arrival, is a magnificent testament of her faith. Then a gun signals the arrival of Pinkerton's boat and she cries, "He loves me!" with all the suffering of three years forgotten in an instant. Her pathetic excitement at the mere idea of a call from the American Consul is enough to suggest how dull and lonely a life she has led since her husband's departure. Had she met any of her own relatives they would only have said, either by word or

glance, "I told you so!" It was better to live in complete and dignified isolation.

After her hopes have been raised to heights of ecstasy in the second act, with the arrival of Pinkerton's ship in the harbour below, they are dashed for ever in the last act when poor Butterfly sees with her own eyes the American Mrs. Pinkerton. In a flash she realises that she has nothing to live for. She has been taught that death with honour is better than life with dishonour, and that fact must come even before consideration of the child she adores. In her Japanese eyes the child is not sufficient reason for living. Butterfly has nothing to live for, so she must die, and by her own hand if necessary.

When I studied this act sitting at the piano, long before I rehearsed it on the stage, I realised the necessity of being able to convey the grim tragedy of the scene with the minimum of movement. As the plaintive music surged up from the orchestra pit, I saw that poor, wronged figure standing in the centre of the empty stage, doing no more than looking hopeless and helpless, brought to a standstill by the cruel, paralysing truth. I knew instantly that I would disagree with any production of the opera which demanded that Butterfly should move about too much in that last scene, fetching and carrying garments or fussing about the room. Puccini has given the prima donna one of the finest acting opportunities in all opera, and I was convinced that the scene would be best played by an artist who realised the value of striking an attitude of static grief.

Such were the impressions I formed of *Madame Butterfly*, as I browsed over the score in my leisure hours, before I had any coaching from Madame Mendl or instruction from a stage director. I still had no definite plans for singing the part in public, though I have to confess that I sang "One Fine Day" rather more frequently at my C.E.M.A. concerts and watched the reaction of the audience with a new interest, pretending to myself that I was in the middle of an operatic performance and

wondering if they were fully conscious of the pathos of the situation.

It was Peter Pears who first raised my hopes. He knew that I was devoting my spare time to a study of the rôle, and on meeting Madame Mendl one day he mentioned that the Sadler's Wells Opera Company were looking for a Butterfly and suggested that I should present myself. I was far from ready for a public performance, of course, as I was only self-taught at that time. However, I went along to the New Theatre, which was the home of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company during the war years, while their own theatre was serving as a rest centre for bombed-out civilians. I sang "One Fine Day" to the directors and they appeared quite pleased with my effort. They explained that the company was going on tour for some weeks, which would give me time to perfect my interpretation of the part. If I cared to accept their suggestion and work hard while they were out of town they would be pleased to let me sing Butterfly as a guest artist for a couple of performances at the New on their return. I gladly agreed and hastened to Madame Mendl for a period of intensive coaching.

I was naturally more conscious now of the musical side of the opera than I had been when working alone, exploring the intricacies of characterisation. I realised Puccini's mastery in writing full-blooded human music that reflected the characters created by his librettists. He knew how to compose ingeniously appropriate music for the stage situation in hand, such as the ecstasy of the love duet at the end of the first act and the dreariness of waiting all through the night at the end of the second act. He knew how to write for the voice, so that the singer's top notes flowed out quite naturally and with far more ease than is the case with a number of other operatic composers. In some odd way Puccini's music seemed to become part of me when I tried to get beneath the skin of Butterfly, because it intensified the situations in her life. The operatic convention no longer appeared unnatural. Butterfly became a living character, as real as anyone

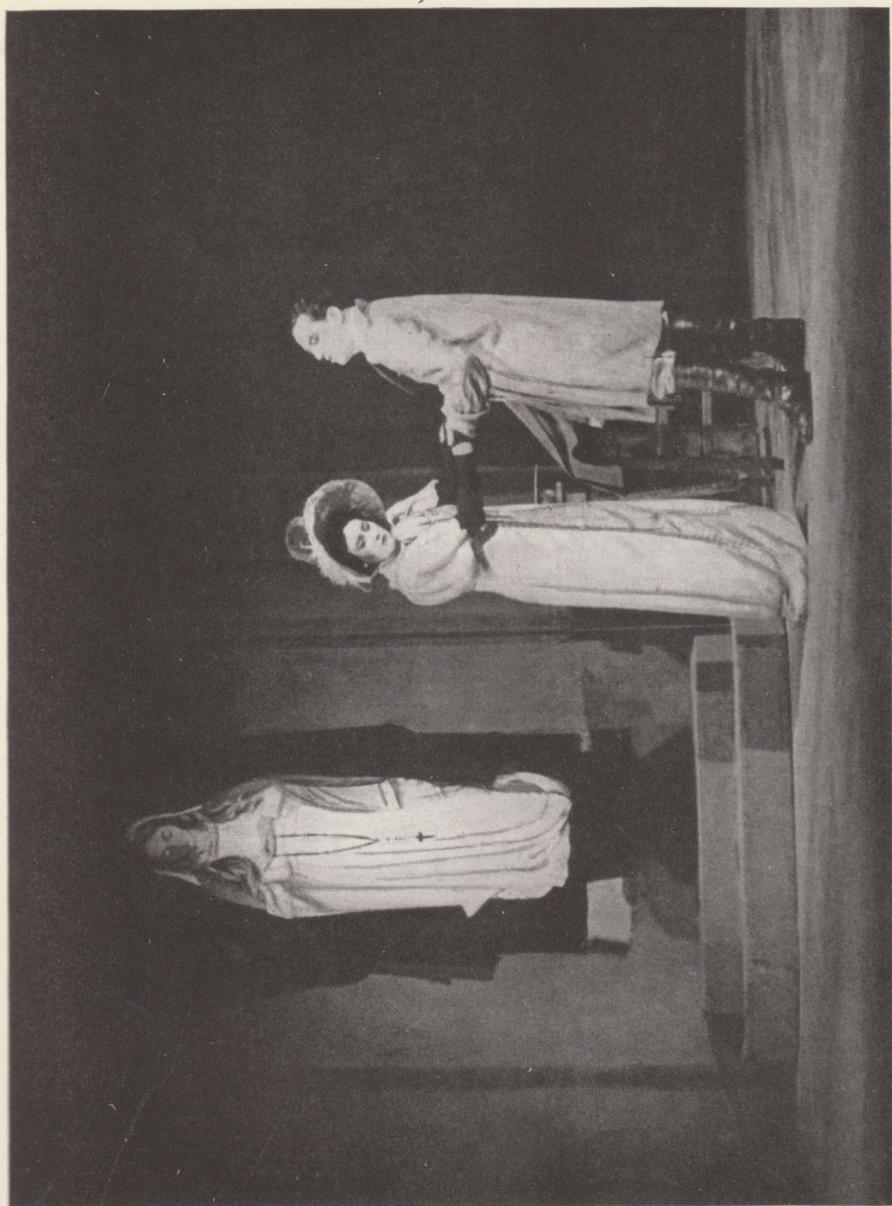
I knew. The singer can live Butterfly's life on the stage with a conviction which she could never hope to bring to a Mozartian rôle. No artist can be swept away by the reality of the characters in *The Magic Flute*, for instance. They exist on a different plane and cannot be considered as people like ourselves. Puccini's heroines, poor helpless Butterfly, pathetic little Mimi, jealous Tosca and unhappy Giorgetta, the frustrated wife in *Il Tabarro*, are no less real than those whose lives make copy for our daily newspapers.

Rarely have I had such encouragement as came my way at the Wigmore Hall Studios one day, when I was working alone at the piano, trying to carry out Madame Mendl's instructions of the previous day. I had just finished singing Butterfly's entrance, most of which is sung off-stage in the opera, as she slowly climbs the hill to meet her bridegroom on the terrace of his house overlooking the harbour. I felt a little apprehensive about the aria, bearing in mind that I would not be able to see the conductor as I sang it, and wondering by what means his beat would be made visible to me. It was all rather nerve-racking, and I hoped that my concern would not be reflected in my singing. At that moment someone tapped on the studio door. In reply to my invitation to enter, a rather pleasing buxom little lady came in. With a radiant smile she informed me that she had heard my singing while walking along the corridor and as it gave her such pleasure, she felt impelled to let me know that I sang the aria just as she had done in the past. Rather at a loss, I had to admit that I did not know the name of my unexpected caller. "I am Rosina Buckman," she smiled.

It was a great comfort to know that my reading had met with the approval of one of the greatest Butterflies of the English-speaking world. I felt much happier about that tricky first entrance under the direction of an invisible conductor.

At least three of Puccini's heroines are heard by the audience before being seen. Butterfly comes on at the end of a line of wedding guests, enjoying one of the most effective entrances in

PLATE VII



Tosca is assured by Cavaradossi that her jealousy is unwarranted. With Ivan Dixon at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin



Donna Anna pleads with Don Ottavio (Gerald Davies) to postpone their intended marriage once more, on account of her mourning for her father
—the final scene from *DON GIOVANNI* at Sadler's Wells

all grand opera. The audience is agog with excitement to see her, the music growing louder and louder, as she gets nearer and nearer to the stage. Finally she appears, greeted by a burst of melody from the orchestra, and maybe a gasp of wonder from the expectant audience. Rarely has suspense been used so cleverly in the introduction of a leading character. Ivor Novello used a similar device in *The Dancing Years* when his prima donna heroine, played by Mary Ellis, was heard off-stage before we saw her. Tosca is heard off-stage singing "Mario, Mario!" as she calls to her lover who is painting in the chapel, and in *La Bohème* Mimi knocks on the door and is heard on the landing before Rudolph admits her to the studio which he shares with his companions. Then again, at the end of the first act of *La Bohème*, as the lovers give themselves up to the passion of their duet, they stroll out on to the staircase and only the beauty of their blended voices is heard drifting back to the empty stage. It makes for an unforgettable moment as the curtain slowly falls. The difficulty of not being able to see the conductor in such instances is usually overcome by having his beat relayed by a *repetiteur* invisible to the audience who can see the singers as well as the bâton.

Even while still studying the music at the piano, I realised that Puccini never shelves his plot. The story flows on quite naturally, so that the singers have the chance of playing their parts convincingly without the sudden suspension of a dramatic situation by an aria which has little or nothing to do with the story. I like an opera with a set aria or two, as long as they arise quite naturally out of the story like Butterfly's "One Fine Day", Tosca's "Vissi d'arte" or Mimi's thumbnail biography in the first act of *La Bohème*. The older composers, such as Mozart, tended to write more static operas, with little or no development of character. Their rôles, entailing endless repetition of the same musical phrases, have so often tended to make opera appear ridiculous to the unimaginative.

Eventually the Sadler's Wells Opera Company returned to town and were ready for me to sing Butterfly as a guest artist.

Joan Cross sent for me to go to the New Theatre, where she took me through the part which she had played with such distinction for so many years. I had not been with Miss Cross very long before I learned one valuable lesson. I saw quite clearly that the prima donna is never a despotic queen of grand opera. She takes her orders from the conductor, even in her big moments when she has the stage to herself with a world-famous aria to sing. Though she is the principal figure in a music drama, unfolded in the theatre under the guidance of the musical director, she is never the only person who matters. As we went through the opera and Miss Cross indicated how my rôle was neatly dovetailed into the general pattern, I began to see that no singer, other than a Flagstad or a Melba, could afford to have any sweeping ideas of her own. Her work might not blend with that of the other principals. Innovations might affect the scheme devised for the others, so I could see that it was wiser to accept, within reason, the interpretation suggested by the producer, knowing that it would harmonise with the rest of the opera. A prima donna too often at variance with the producer might get a reputation for being difficult and eventually find her services no longer in demand. In any case, even a prima donna intent upon a sensational interpretation of a famous operatic rôle is bound to be curbed by the music. Her ideas cannot be too far-fetched, as all her work is done to music and the conductor holds the reins throughout the evening. The actor has far greater freedom as he speaks his lines without accompaniment. Even in dialogue, which he shares with another artist, he speaks his own lines solo, but it is so different in opera where, in a duet, the soprano may frequently have to sing at the same time as the tenor and blend her voice with his. Having to consider her fellow-singer, the music, and the tempo set and regulated by the conductor, she has little or no chance to play any pranks or spring any surprises upon her audience. An actor playing Hamlet may vary his tempo or even change the expression of a line without causing any inconvenience to others in the cast.

I enjoyed acting as much as singing, and though words, music and acting are three distinct and separate studies, it was soon obvious that in opera they must be so welded as to become one and indivisible. No operatic rôle can carry conviction unless all three blend to produce a completely satisfying form of musical expression. Though I had never taken any specialised lessons in acting I was not overwhelmed at the thought of having to interpret the character of Butterfly. I relied upon my own natural feelings to form a basis for my acting and I put my trust in the force of the music and the stage situation to plunge me into the right mood. I was sufficiently sensitive to the lines in the libretto to know that my face would light up quite naturally as I sang a gay sentence such as, "He's here, he loves me!" I did not have to think too much about "lighting up" my expression to match the meaning of the lines I sang. I knew it would happen automatically, as it does when I speak. I could see the necessity of simplicity of movement and gesture, as far as Butterfly was concerned. The stage presentation must not be too fussy, because singing must always be the first consideration in opera. As the public come to hear the music, I knew that whatever happened in the stage action, I must always be in a position to sing with ease, and must never be bothered by complicated acting routines. While standing about the stage, which is an inevitable occupation for the opera singer at more than one point during the evening, the Japanese prints in the British Museum had taught me how to hold my arms to show off the beauty of my kimono. The poise of the shoulders is of vital importance, especially when holding a closed fan, if it is to look like something more than a painted stick. As I never weary of looking at those prints, I felt that an audience would not easily tire of contemplating a stage figure who managed to capture their beauty of stance. From the very beginning I understood that there are moments in *Madame Butterfly* when the drama lies completely in the music, and the wise prima donna will stand still, particularly in that impressive last scene, and let the music express the tragedy for her.

Puccini's score will tell a much more poignant story than any complicated mime or gestures. With the aid of such music and some common-sense production the paltry situation of Belasco's story, though based on false premises, almost passes for tragedy. Rarely has a composer displayed such theatrical mastery.

When the great ordeal arrived on that historic night in 1943, and I played my first *Butterfly* at the New, I tried to remember all that I had been told and all I had thought about poor little Cho-Cho-San as I fluttered along the corridor leading from my dressing-room to the stage. Then I fell under the spell of the music, as I tried to persuade the audience that *Butterfly* was a truly tragic figure and not the mere victim of a falsely sentimental situation. As the curtain fell, I hoped I had succeeded, but I needed definite evidence. On leaving the theatre the stage door-keeper gave me a small package which he said had been handed in by two American naval officers, who had not stayed to see me. On the back of an old air mail envelope these two unknown admirers had written, "All American officers are not like Pinkerton. Please accept our last packet of gum as a token of appreciation and admiration." It was a wonderful tribute and meant more to me than all the remarks passed by well-meaning friends, who wished to encourage me with a little harmless flattery. It was far more gratifying to have moved two complete strangers, who had no desire even to make my acquaintance, but felt rather ashamed of the way in which my *Butterfly* had been treated in the opera by one of their fellow-countrymen. Obviously it had touched their hearts, which was proof enough that my Cho-Cho-San had been something more than a concert performance in costume.

The next day, when discussing my singing of "One Fine Day", *The Times* critic was kind enough to write, "One was glad when the audience broke into applause in the true Italian fashion after her solo in Act II, for she deserved the compliment."

I had come through the ordeal of my first appearance in grand opera with a few sticks of chewing gum from two unknown

Americans and a few lines of praise from the music critic of our leading national newspaper, so I felt sufficiently encouraged to think about tackling another rôle. I am glad to say that the directors of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company were pleased with my performance and soon afterwards invited me to join the company as a permanent member. I was only too happy to sign the contract, as it was so obvious that Madame Mendl had been right to insist upon my taking up opera, which gave me fuller musical satisfaction than I had previously experienced in my career.

VII

LA TOSCA AND OTHERS

CURIOUSLY enough Madame Mendl was not entirely happy about my success as a prima donna. She said it was all wrong to sing *Butterfly* and follow it immediately with other major rôles, instead of leading up to them gradually. She deplored the fact that I had not gone into opera as soon as I had finished my training. I should have sung small parts in Mozart until I felt ready—technically, emotionally and temperamentally—to tackle the plums of the prima donna's repertoire.

I saw her point, but nothing could be done about it at this stage in my career. I was already in my early thirties and when I ought to have been singing the minor Mozart parts I had been serving my apprenticeship in the theatre. I consoled myself, believing that playing Alice Fitzwarren in *Dick Whittington* had taught me more about stagecraft than such small parts as the First Genie in *The Magic Flute*. It did not take me long to observe that I moved about the stage with greater ease than those of my colleagues who had graduated straight from the academy to the opera house. I had not wasted my time in pantomime and touring revue, since those shows taught me never to be content with the conventional set of movements which all too frequently passed for acting on the opera stage.

My second part with the Sadler's Wells Company was Mimi in *La Bohème*. There had been some suggestion about my singing Musetta, but I refused the rôle, feeling that Mimi was far better suited to my voice. I never found the part a great tax from a vocal point of view, and enjoyed portraying a character with the

audience on her side from the beginning. My doctor paid me a great compliment after seeing the last act, saying that I died with astonishing realism. A girl suffering from Mimi's complaint would tend to enjoy little bursts of energy, followed by rather disheartening collapses. I tried to convey this effect and discovered that Puccini had written the music so that the part could be sung that way.

After singing Marenka in *The Bartered Bride*, I appeared in my third Puccini rôle—Giorgetta, in the one-act opera, *Il Tabarro*. Giorgetta is more a woman of the world than either Butterfly or Mimi. The part of the French barge-master's wife, concealing a secret love affair with a young dock-hand on a Paris quayside, appealed to me at the outset, as it offered such wonderful histrionic opportunities. The story could easily be used as the libretto for a three-act opera, but by not wasting a second, Puccini has packed this intense drama into a single hour. The music has a brooding, sinister quality which suggests that disaster is never very far away. The sounds of the big city are all in the music—the motor horns, the cat-calls and the general buzz of a metropolis. Over and above all this, the opera has the tension and suspense of a thriller. Though Giorgetta has little to do on the stage, she has much to express. She can no longer respond to her husband's caresses. She is apathetic as he touches her. She has to convey to the audience that her husband no longer excites her. She resigns herself to a life of boredom and sullen silences, a frustrated wife, infatuated by the glitter of Paris.

I enjoyed that wonderful moment when she first lets the audience into the secret that she is in love with Luigi, the dock-hand. Some of the labourers come on to the barge for a drink at the end of the day's work and dance a few steps to the strains of an accordion. Giorgetta wrestles in the arms of a well-meaning, though gauche, bargee, but when she changes over to dance with Luigi their steps melt into a harmony of perfect rhythm. Even in a straight play this incident would be effective enough, but

with Puccini's highly dramatic music, it is a moment to remember. Later, the yearning of the lovers for each other is mirrored in the quivering music, which makes the acting so much easier for the singers. Puccini gives the two men a golden opportunity on a vocally silent stage. The orchestra works up to a tremendous climax as the husband lights his pipe, which Luigi takes to be Giorgetta's signal to emerge from the quay-side shadows and join her on the barge. Half the acting is done for the singers by the orchestra.

There is another wonderful example in *Gianni Schicchi*, my next Puccini opera, when the family search high and low for Donati's will, to music which has a tremendous bustling quality about it and consequently makes the scene all the more amusing.

After mastering the intricate music of Felicia in Wolf-Ferrari's *School for Fathers* I realised one of my dearest ambitions—*La Tosca*.

La Tosca brought a new excitement. Being intrigued by the acting side of these operatic rôles, I was overjoyed to play *Tosca*, not having forgotten that the libretto had been adapted by Illica and Giacosa from a play by Victorien Sardou—a play written to exploit the genius of Sarah Bernhardt. To do full justice to the rôle it would be necessary to be as great an actress as a singer, so before I started working seriously upon the music, I delved into the history of the play to try and recapture something of the spell which Bernhardt must have cast. When she first played the part in Paris, as far back as 1887, the author said that her acting eclipsed anything seen within living memory, outstripping triumphs on the French stage by Mlle Georges, Marie Dorval and Rachel. Maurice Baring said that no one who had ever seen Bernhardt in *La Tosca* could ever forget it. One was haunted by the expression on her face, when the terrible truth dawned upon her in the third act. In the files of *The Stage* I read of Bernhardt's first London appearance as *Tosca* at the Lyceum in the summer of 1888, when not only did the first-night audience shudder at many of the more poignant

passages, but audible gasps of horror were heard in all parts of the house.

The play had been made to measure for Bernhardt, and without an actress of consummate power it stood but a poor chance of success. She played it in such a manner that the crude melodrama exercised an irresistible fascination upon the audience which she held spellbound. On the occasion of her first London performance as Tosca, *The Stage* critic declared that Bernhardt had never looked more youthful, more tender, more passionate or more bewitching, though she was forty-four at the time. I learned much about the manner in which Tosca should be played as I read those old criticisms. Though Sarah wallowed in the agony scenes, her greatest moments were those in which fondness and jealousy warred with each other for the upper hand. That was obviously a significant point to stress in playing the part, though I was still reminded of the exquisitely pretty passages, which Bernhardt played in her most enchanting key.

Had I not known about Bernhardt's connection with Sardou's play, a mere glance at the libretto would have been enough to convince me that *La Tosca* is a strong play, emotionally stimulating, with a passionate love interest and an exciting murder, committed in full view of the audience. The part demands subtle and refined acting because, as a character, Tosca is closer to the theatrical than to the operatic tradition. She has some conversational passages which are almost like the pages of a play set to music. In the great scene with Scarpia in the second act, he actually sings, "Let us have a friendly talk together!" There is a conversational air about the entire scene as they "talk" tête-à-tête, each listening to the other and reacting accordingly, as if they might be playing in a drama without music. While he tries to strike his vile bargain with Tosca, her loathing is mirrored in her face, as she listens to his side of the story. At one point she is called upon to *speak* a line. After murdering her persecutor, she looks upon the body from the steps at the back of the stage and with a sense of tremendous relief she sighs,

"Only yesterday all Rome trembled before him!" Spoken, this line seems far more dramatic than it could possibly be, even set to Puccini's eloquent music. As the entire opera is so closely related to the theatre it is essential that the acting should not be vastly different from that seen on the legitimate stage.

As soon as I started rehearsing *Tosca* I realised restraint should be the keynote of the histrionic aspect of the part. The struggle with Scarpia in the murder scene needed very careful playing, or it might so easily provoke laughter. I remembered a comment by Bernhardt on this scene, quoted by May Agate in her admirable book, *Madame Sarah*. Referring to the stabbing scene, Bernhardt said, "Let your audience read your intention on your face, let them see you pick up the knife and conceal it—then, having raised their expectation, you can 'hold it' as long as you like and the actual stabbing may follow in as rapid and violent a movement as you care to give it. You will never get a laugh if you have 'prepared' your audience. Otherwise it might strike them as funny!" I pondered over these words of wisdom and found them of tremendous help when working on this scene, though, unlike Bernhardt, the prima donna is governed by the music and cannot hold her silences indefinitely.

Not only in the stabbing scene is it necessary for *Tosca* to let the audience read her thoughts on her face. I make significant play with my eyes on my haughty first entrance, conveying to the audience *Tosca's* impetuous nature, her jealousy and the melting tenderness of her love for Mario. Scarpia, by discovering a fan in the church where Mario is painting, sows devilish seeds of suspicion and soon whips *Tosca* to fire and fury, thereby making even heavier demands upon the singer's acting ability. Apart from the moment in the following act, when *Tosca* sings her world-famous "*Vissi d'arte*", most of her singing with Scarpia is of a conversational nature, in which the words have to be carefully pointed, as much of the dialogue is devised to plant the plot. On that account the acting can afford to be natural and not much larger than life.

Puccini heightens the dramatic situation of the murder scene with some wonderful orchestral music. The tense seconds tick away without a note being sung, as Tosca watches the body of her victim roll down the steps. In a silence quivering with suppressed excitement she lays the crucifix on the corpse before she makes her majestic escape. Being a true man of the theatre, Puccini realised the value of silence, and instead of giving Tosca a dramatic aria he leaves her to hold the audience in suspense, without singing a note. The music which rises from the orchestra pit after Scarpia has received his fatal wound would enable even a baritone with little or no acting talent to die most movingly. It plunges the audience into a receptive frame of mind and apart from practically doing the actor's job for him, it helps to tell the story in the most memorable manner, which may be one reason why the play has so rarely been performed since the opera appeared in 1900. It was the same with *Madame Butterfly*. Once the public saw the operatic versions of these tragedies they had no desire to witness a stage performance, stripped of Puccini's music. The operas seem to have killed the Sardou and Belasco plays from which they were adapted.

La Tosca is not all storm and stress. Sardou gave Bernhardt a chance to use the famous *voix d'or* in a tender key and Puccini has given his prima donna a similar opportunity. There is a lyrical tenderness about the duet in the last act when Tosca explains her plan for a fake execution and how she intends to open Mario's eyes with a thousand kisses after the firing squad has departed. With gladness in her heart she anticipates a happy future, once she gets him away to a place of safety. The last act reveals a development of character. The jealous woman of the opening scene is now only concerned with saving her lover. Having learned her lesson, her one idea is to snatch him from the jaws of death and enjoy the rest of her life at his side. One can imagine her eyes blinded with tears of happiness as she looks forward to the days to come.

The tragedy follows quickly upon this tender mood, and the

final curtain falls upon Tosca's intensely dramatic suicidal leap from the battlements. The last few moments of the opera have to be carefully timed. As Spoletta approaches Tosca, she should sweep out her cloak to blind him, for just long enough to give herself time to leap to a freedom which means death. The stage business of the last act calls for a set that gives the actors sufficient space to move about. I think the scene should suggest a flat roof, so that the lovers can come down to the footlights to sing their duet and later, after the execution, Tosca can move up-stage in readiness for her last moments. If the prima donna is confined in a box-set at the back of the stage she cannot hope to give the closing moments of the opera that final flourish which both Sardou and Puccini would have wished.

Since Jeritza chose to sing "Vissi d'arte" lying flat upon her stomach in the centre of the stage, all sorts of opinions have been expressed about the stage presentation of this magnificent aria, considered by many to be the finest in all Italian grand opera. It shows the softer side of Tosca's character, the real human woman behind the façade of the idolised prima donna. It is also a moving plea for sympathy. Who can resist a tear for Tosca when the aria is really well sung? It needs a lot of singing, particularly being placed where it is in the opera, just after the struggle with Scarpia and all those top notes which must be sung to give the impression of screams. When Dennis Arundell first produced *La Tosca* at Sadler's Wells he suggested that I should sing most of the aria on my knees, facing the audience, but rise to my feet for the top note at the end. Later I found it more effective to fall on my knees after the high note; then, at the end of the aria, which I sing with my back to Scarpia, I walk across the stage on my knees to seek mercy at his feet. The change of stage business looked good from the front, so we retained it.

There is not the same tendency nowadays to sing an aria in a particular way, simply because it has been sung that way since the first production of the opera, which may have been a hundred or more years ago. While I am the first to respect

tradition, I think it absurd never to consider presenting opera in any but the original manner. I am all for introducing new stage business or new presentation, as long as it is reasonable and does not handicap the singer. Above all, it must look effective from the auditorium and assist in the projection of the music-drama, which is what opera should always strive to be—the telling of a story on the stage by means of acting, singing and music, so dynamically united that they emerge as a new art of three indissoluble components.

The singer who plays Tosca with any frequency must be technically capable, or her voice will soon suffer. Her passionate screams must never be real screams; unless they are well sung her voice will soon be the worse for wear. Though Tosca is one of the heaviest rôles in Italian opera, it is not as vocally exhausting as *Butterfly*. In the second act of *Madame Butterfly* the singer has a greater number of dramatic climaxes and as they are all sung, rather than acted, the rôle becomes a more difficult vocal proposition than Tosca. There is less development of character in Tosca, as the entire opera takes place between the noon of one day and the dawn of the next, while we see *Butterfly* over a span of three years. For all that, Tosca hovers between the heights and depths of emotion during the few hours of her life which Sardou has shown us. The love music is rich with experience, so different from that given to innocent little *Butterfly*, to whom love was something new and wonderful. Tosca is a full-blooded emotional woman, both in her private and professional life, and on that account I think her music should be sung with passionate feeling. That last despairing phrase in “Vissi d’arte” should be given with a catch in the breath and end with a half-sob. Puccini’s score calls for it, and surely Sardou’s writing suggests a heroine who was not afraid to give vent to her feelings. I know that Bernhardt would have agreed with me. There can surely be no higher authority.

After adding Tosca to my repertoire I sang Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana* at Sadler’s Wells before being invited to join

the Covent Garden Opera Company to sing my first Mozart part, Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, followed by Octavian in *Rosenkavalier*, Eva in *The Mastersingers*, and Micaela in *Carmen*. Vocally, Pamina called for more restraint and demanded a higher degree of vocal technique than any previous rôle I had studied. Musically Octavian proved the most difficult study of all these rôles, but I enjoyed appearing as a boy for the first time and was fortunate in playing the part opposite two Sophies—Virginia McWatters and Leni Lynn—who were both petite. On that account our stage business was convincing and I was able to give the impression of being in love with them, while cherishing a desire to protect them against danger.

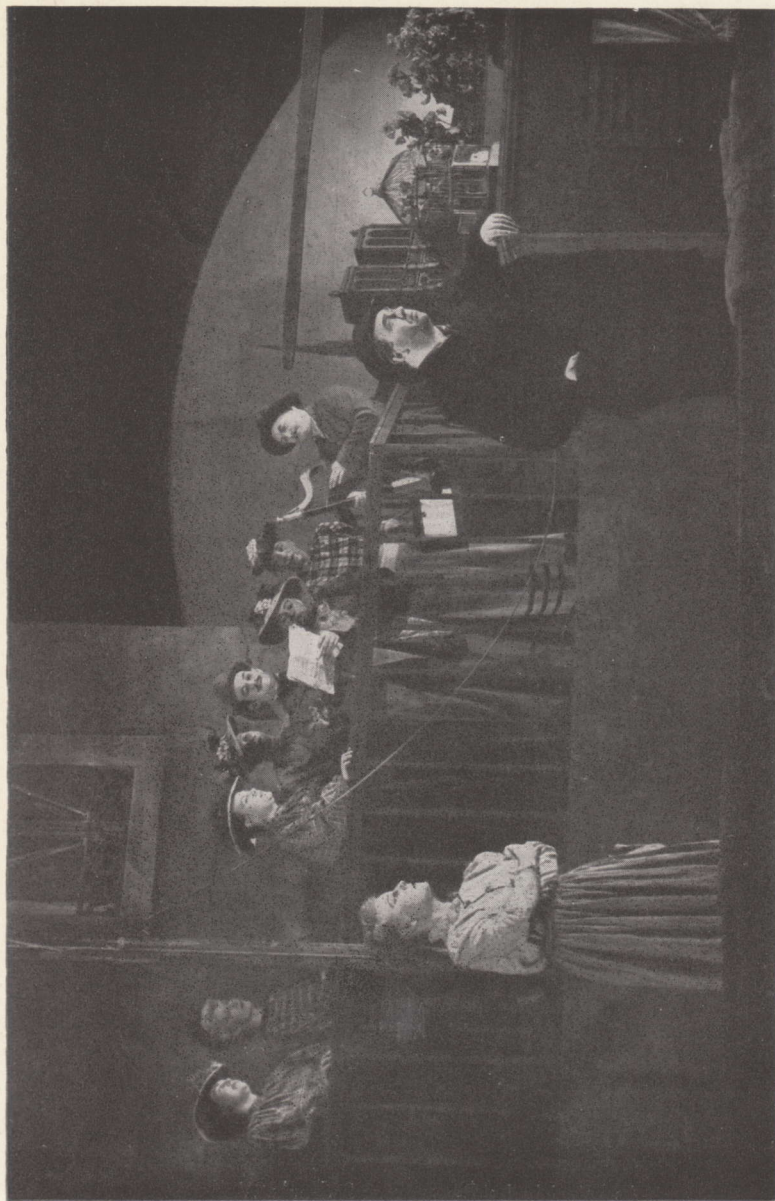
Amelia was my first Verdi part on the stage. As *Simone Boccanegra* was not seen in this country until 1948 at Sadler's Wells, though it was originally presented in Venice as long ago as 1857 and revised by Verdi for a production in Milan in 1881, opinions seem to vary as to the interpretation of the heroine. Many seem to think that she is a slip of a girl in the first flush of youth, and on that account my rather maturer playing of the part was criticised in certain quarters. At first I was asked to play the part wearing long plaits down my back, but later I pinned them round my head to give the impression of an older woman. Although Amelia does not appear in the prologue of the opera, she must have been about five years old at that time, in order to remember incidents which she recalls later in the story. In the Verdi score there is a lapse of twenty-five years between the prologue and the first act, which makes Amelia a woman of thirty, to say the least. When the opera was staged at Sadler's Wells by John Moody, in an English version by Norman Tucker, the lapse of time between the prologue and the first act was cut down to twenty years, but even this shorter period still makes Amelia about twenty-five, so I maintain that I was right to pin up my plaits. There is a tendency in this country to give the part to lighter sopranos, whereas on the Continent it is sung by heavier voices, because producers abroad regard Amelia as an

older woman. In New York, for instance, the character has met with universal approval when sung by so heavy a voice as that of Astrid Varnay, long famous for her interpretations of Isolde and Brünnhilde. In England the part is not viewed in the same light.

Then came Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, which I was asked to take over at short notice on my return to Sadler's Wells, immediately on top of my study of *Simone Boccanegra*. Just as the music proved the most difficult problem in learning Octavian, so the vocal aspect, that is the technicalities of the singing, demanded most of my attention when I sang Donna Anna. Mozart offered a decided contrast to Puccini. Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* is the most human of Mozart heroines, but though the music is a joy to sing, Donna Anna does not offer the same satisfaction as the warmer, nearer-to-life rôles of Tosca or Butterfly. The repetition in the music is one reason why Mozart parts seem so remote. In Puccini there is practically no repetition. He wrote music-drama. His operas unfold themselves like a play and the music sweeps along quite naturally, so that none of his arias hold up the action, and he makes each point but once. How different from a Mozart opera, in which the plot develops in a far more leisurely manner, because the characters sing the same phrases over and over again. When Donna Anna, for instance, decides to join forces with Don Ottavio to avenge the death of her father they sing "Let this be our only thought!"—not once but at least ten times. Such an artificial form of the operatic convention makes acting rather a difficult problem. One cannot create a definite gesture to match such a line because it would have to be repeated so many times that the result would be ludicrous. As far as possible it is better to allow the music to tell its own story, in a Mozart opera, on account of the endless repetition. The acting opportunities, such as Donna Anna's continual fainting fits, occur in between the arias, when the plot gets a chance to move a few steps forward. Mozart is more effective when presented in a smaller opera house, about the size of the Continental court theatres, as the texture of these

masterpieces is so much smaller and finer than Puccini. In consequence the operas call for lighter singing and a perfectly poised voice. They would be too heavy if sung with the same sweeping attack which a prima donna uses when singing *Tosca* or *Aïda*. In any case, the endless repetition in the music would exhaust her if she sang all evening with the gusto of a Verdian dramatic soprano. The breadth of interpretation demanded by the Italian operas would be quite out of place.

PLATE IX



Giorgetta asks what troubles her husband Michele (Roderick Jones), while the ballad singer serenades the mininettes—a tense scene from *IL TABARRO* at Sadler's Wells

PLATE X



As Mimi in LA BOHEME at Sadler's Wells

VIII

OPERATIC OPINIONS

AFTER singing some sixteen leading rôles at Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells, and appearing in concert versions of *Aïda* and *The Flying Dutchman*, I have come to the conclusion that there is insufficient understanding in Britain of the needs of the growing artist. I realise the wisdom of Madame Mendl's belief that singers should climb the ladder to leading operatic parts slowly and surely, by way of the smaller supporting rôles. To-day there is a tendency to push young singers into leading parts before they are ready for them. The youngsters naturally accept them, as something of a golden opportunity, but they run a danger of wearing out their voices before they are fully developed. In many instances by the time youthful artists have acquired sufficient experience to do justice to a leading rôle they are already suffering from over-work, through having played far too many parts before either their voices or personalities have fully developed. A voice which is still growing cannot be expected to sing heavy parts, like the Puccini heroines, two or three times a week. The artist should grow into bigger parts by easy stages. The precise age of development is a purely personal matter. In some cases a girl's voice may not reach its fullness of power until she is thirty, yet Victoria de Los Angeles acquired a rich, full, steady voice at a much earlier age. The reason may be due to the fact that she comes from Spain, where women mature earlier and where climate and customs would have an effect upon the voice.

The direction of singers calls for understanding, which should

preferably be acquired after years of practical experience in operatic production. The position of an opera house director is one of great responsibility, calling for a knowledge of all operatic rôles in the regular repertoire, so that the voices in his company can be matched with parts most suitable to their range and timbre. In addition he has to be a sort of resident producer-cum-business-manager. Apart from being capable of engaging the most useful artists for his team, he must know how to cast them to the best advantage.

I think that the singers should be chosen before the opera. If I ran an opera company I would engage my singing personnel and then decide what operas they could perform to best advantage. It seems madness to consider staging *Carmen* or *Boris Godunov* if there is no artist available to sing those great rôles without causing Emma Calvé or Feodor Chaliapin to turn in their graves. On the other hand, if a soprano arrives with the ability to produce an endless cascade of dazzling vocal fireworks, why not revive *Lucia di Lammermoor* or *La Sonnambula* for her? That the coat should be cut according to the cloth, or the opera cast according to the singers available, seems the obvious course to take.

There is a praiseworthy tendency to-day to present opera as music-drama. More attention is paid to acting. Singers attempt to do more on the stage than simply sing their arias as perfectly as they know how, and in this age of dieting the prima donna pays more attention to her figure, so the elephantine soprano is practically as extinct as the dodo. Though operatic heroines are now more convincing, this craze for a good stage picture can be carried too far, especially when stage producers are called in to direct opera without being able to distinguish one note of music from another. Never for a moment should it be forgotten that people go to the opera to hear the music. If that were not so, Sardou's *La Tosca* would draw a bigger public than Puccini's. Music must always be the first consideration in opera, and on that account I feel opera should be produced by someone with as

deep a knowledge of music as of the theatre rather than by an ingenious stage producer whose feeling for music is negligible. Singers must have freedom of movement on the stage and both costumes and décor should be supervised by a director anxious for the cast to be neither hampered nor embarrassed by sensational creations, even though they may make front page news. In a recent production of *Salome* at Covent Garden, Salvador Dali created a head-dress for Constance Shacklock, as Herodias, which one newspaper described as a miniature Punch and Judy theatre. What singer could hope to be at her best when condemned to work under such a handicap?

Grand opera is not grand enough for my liking in this present age. Producers must realise that Italian opera was written by passionate composers of the South and it should not be staged like an English musical comedy. Surely some attempt should be made to present operas according to the manner in which they were written, just as Geoffrey Dunn staged *Don Giovanni* at Sadler's Wells, attempting to reproduce as closely as possible the conditions of the first performance in Prague in 1787. Tanya Moiseiwitsch's enchanting décor helped to recapture this page of the past, and though the action was of secondary importance to the music, the two were cunningly united so that the stage picture appeared to heighten the effect of the music.

The tendency to entrust young and inexperienced artists with leading rôles is one of the reasons why opera is fast losing its grandeur. From what one reads of the prima donnas of the Golden Age, they trod the boards like queens. They had a sense of style and dominated the stage. They were women of compelling personality, so when they appeared as Violetta in *La Traviata* or Marguerite in *Faust* they held every eye and ear in the house.

The days of big, glittering, dazzling, dominating personalities seem to have passed. Now audiences are becoming too easily satisfied with grand opera presented on a smaller scale, without the vocal brilliance of the past. The immortal rôles of opera

should not be sung in a small way, like a schoolboy trying to play Hamlet. Opera cannot be sung in that manner if it is to retain its magic and bring audiences to their feet in a fever of excitement. It is tending to become commonplace and will lose that magic if works are scheduled for production even before there is a certainty of securing singers capable of doing them justice.

Once performances become mediocre opera singers are regarded as ordinary people instead of kings and queens of music. Democracy in the arts can be carried too far until it destroys all respect for the art, formerly worshipped by both performer and listener. When the prima donna is dragged down to earth she is in danger, sooner or later, of breeding contempt in the bosom of those who once came to worship her. Looked at from the other point of view, surely a singer who is conscious of being idolised is far more likely to give an inspired performance than an artist treated as one of the crowd. When opera-lovers, who are complete strangers, address singers at the stage door by their Christian names, or even nicknames, they are taking the first step towards dislodging their idols from that lofty niche which formerly lent a certain enchantment to their artistry.

The opera house need no longer be regarded as the most conservative of institutions, content to limit its repertoire to some twenty or thirty operas. The progressive Third Programme on the radio offers an admirable shop window for rarely heard operas. It is comparatively cheap to present an opera on the air, as the cast sing from the score and do not need as much rehearsal as for a stage production. There is no question of décor or costumes and no necessity to work out stage moves and lighting effects. The entire work is ready for public performance after a few studio rehearsals.

The director of an opera house, intent upon breaking away from endless productions of *Faust*, *La Bohème* and *Rigoletto*, might do well to keep an ear on the Third Programme. If he knows his job as well as he should, he will be able to decide which of the unfamiliar operas stand a chance of winning popular approval on

the stage. After listening to such works on the air he might consider it worth while to produce some unfamiliar operas by the masters—works which are little more than names in the reference books—such as Verdi's *Ernani*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* or *L'Africaine*, Giordano's *Fédora*, Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugen Onegin* or Massenet's *Werther*. Pioneering is not as difficult or expensive as it was, with the Third Programme at hand to do so much of the spade work.

Translations of foreign libretti are less absurd than they used to be. A number by Proctor Gregg are in use on the air, and Professor Edward Dent's versions in the theatre are a great improvement upon the literal jargon which has so rightly been burlesqued in revue.

It is not always an easy matter to transpose an opera from one language into another. The music was naturally composed to fit the original words, which may have been Italian, French or German, and one finds that the stress does not always fall in the same place in the translation, which is a powerful argument in favour of singing opera in its original language.

As far as Italian is concerned, it is a much easier language to sing, because the vowel sounds lend themselves to vocalisation. No prima donna who has once sung *Tosca* or *Gilda* in Italian would want to sing it in English. However, if the work is to be translated, the librettist must use his common sense, avoid a slavishly literal translation and aim at producing an idiomatic English equivalent which, while making sense, will flow as naturally as the original text.

It is most essential that a reasonably intelligent version should be used in the radio transmissions of opera, as listeners cannot see the singers and have to imagine what is happening entirely on the strength of the words they hear. I believe that French is one of the most difficult of all languages to translate for operatic purposes, as it is so pretty a language in itself with delicate sounds and tones which have no counterpart in English. I cannot imagine

any English version of *Pelleas et Mélisande* being half so effective as the original text by Maurice Maeterlinck.

If leading operatic rôles are going to be given to singers in their early twenties who are not sufficiently developed emotionally to appreciate the tragic significance of the parts they are asked to interpret, I think that it is only fair to the youngsters to arrange for them to have intensive and individual coaching by musical authorities who know the operas intimately. It would be unfair to expect finished performances from singers who are little more than advanced students, but a coach could help by showing them their rôles in relation to the other parts in the opera and in relation to other classic parts in the operatic repertoire. Mimi in *La Bohème* and Violetta in *La Traviata* are two heroines with much in common, though it may not be obvious to the young student with a limited experience of opera. Both Mimi and Violetta have their hour of happiness, one in a garret in the Latin Quarter, the other in a Paris salon. One moves to the modest Café Momus, the other to the brilliant Louis XIV palace of Flora Bervoix, to continue the round of gaiety. Both are deserted by their lovers and both are reconciled on their death-beds, suffering from the same wasting malady. As their walks of life are different, one dies in squalor, the other in luxury. If such a comparison is indicated by a well-informed coach, beginners will find their operatic studies much more interesting.

Each stage situation should be explained to them, so that they know the significance of every line they are called upon to sing. Coming fresh to a rôle a youngster has her own immature ideas about interpretation, but naturally welcomes the opinion of a guide, philosopher and friend. Opera demands more than singing, and the coach should be at the singer's service for knowledgeable discussion. He should help her to grow into her rôle in such a way that she knows the reason for every gesture.

The first contact with an operatic part is vital, as the singer will probably continue to sing the rôle in much the same manner

for the rest of her days. My outlook on *Butterfly*, which I have sung over 150 times, is much the same as when I first worked on the score, although to-day I may give a more finished performance. An actor's reading of *Hamlet* may change and take on a more mature quality as he gets older, but it is different with the prima donna and her rôles. The music offers a clear indication of how the part should be sung, in addition to creating the atmosphere in which the story is enacted. The singer is governed by the composer's ideas as well as by the music which comments upon the character in its own way. On that account it is essential that she should start off on the right foot, with all the help the authorities and the reference books can offer. If, on the occasion of her début in a part, she presents a false interpretation of the character, she may go on repeating it throughout her career.

There are certain pages of music in opera which are so expressive and descriptive of the particular stage situation that their beauty should not be impaired by the intrusion of distracting stage business. The final trio in *Faust* is a case in point. Marguerite's mind is wandering, as she lies in her prison cell. Faust begs her to escape with him, while Mephistopheles tries to exert his evil influence. She breaks through her despair, and ignoring Faust's entreaties and defying the fiend at her side, she offers up an impassioned prayer to heaven, imploring forgiveness. Each repetition of Marguerite's prayer rises in pitch. The first time it is in G, then it ascends to A and finally to B, creating a magnificent effect of piling up and up, as the music mounts in excitement to a highly dramatic ensemble. This vivid music is one of the purple patches, not only of *Faust*, but of all opera, and when the coach discusses it with a new Marguerite he should stress the necessity of singing it directly to the audience. The magic of Gounod's music will have the desired effect and leave a memorable impression upon the listeners. I saw one production of the opera in which Faust on one side, and Mephistopheles on the other, were each permitted to take one of Marguerite's hands and pull her first one way and then the other. Apart from putting

the prima donna at a disadvantage, the scene lost much of its power, as the direct appeal of the music was blurred by unnecessary and over-elaborate stage action. A round table conference in the opera house between the producer and the musical director would prevent unrestrained enthusiasm on the part of any one member of the operatic production team.

IX

MY VOICE

LIKE the actor and the dancer, the singer is his own medium of expression. As my instrument is so essentially part of myself, many believe my life must be dominated by my voice, but I am no more the slave of my voice than Menuhin of his fiddle. In my case, of course, a cold would have more disastrous consequences than if suffered by a writer or one whose voice is not his medium of expression, but life would hardly be worth living if my voice proved an ever-present source of anxiety, and were that so I should certainly have chosen a different career.

Singing, to my way of thinking, should appear quite natural to the listener, and on that account the artist should live as naturally as possible, governed by common sense instead of hard and fast rules. I have never coddled myself as a precaution against colds, as I am convinced it is the surest way to become a hypochondriac and to lay oneself open to the first cold that comes along. Similarly I think it is a mistake for a singer to rely too much upon cough drops, throat sprays or special drinks, taken just before a performance. They become habit-forming and the singer is liable to be plunged into a state of minor panic if the ritual cannot be carried out. Lozenges, drugs and potions, if used too frequently, can be as harmful as blind superstition.

By adopting Annie Oakley's philosophy and "doin' what comes naturally" the singer will avoid physical exhaustion which invariably has a detrimental effect on the voice. When I am tired my voice sounds less clear than normally. On such occasions it becomes necessary to "push" or force it, but the

rather dead and dull result is soon detected by those listeners who know something about voice production. When I feel that I am getting over-tired I try, if possible, to slacken the pace by easing off on rehearsals, or avoiding engagements occurring in quick succession, but all this is far easier said than done.

A choral society, for instance, may engage me six months ahead to sing in a performance of *The Messiah*. The concert may be held, shall we say, in Leeds. Being a permanent member of an opera company, I can never be sure which nights I shall be called upon to sing until a few weeks before the time. Having already asked permission to sing in Leeds, I know that particular night will be free, but when the operatic schedule for the season is drawn up I may discover that I am singing *Butterfly* the night before my *Messiah* and *Tosca* the night afterwards, with a long train journey between each engagement. Nothing can be done about it. I cannot cancel my Leeds appearance, or I shall quite justifiably earn a reputation in the profession for unreliability. I have to stand by the three commitments and hope to do justice to all of them. There may be a spell of leisure beforehand and possibly a night or two of freedom afterwards to enable me to enjoy a little relaxation.

A heavy season has no fears for me, as a singer who has been taught to use her voice correctly need have no worries about wear and tear. Only bad singing wears out a voice before its time. The great masters, such as Sir George Henschel, Sir Charles Santley and Ben Davies, were all singing magnificently in their seventies. Melba gave a glorious performance of *Mimi* when she sang her farewell at Covent Garden at the age of sixty-seven. Tetrassini and Battistini were both enchanting audiences in their sixties, after a lifetime of hard singing. Their training was based on a good *Bel Canto* foundation, and so their voices lasted well into old age. My Berlin teacher, Professor Grenzebach, used to say, "Sing in the mask of the face. Use the nose and the mouth and your voice will last a lifetime." The

voice could almost be likened to a motor car engine. If it is well used, it will give long and reliable service.

In opera I suppose Wagner has written the most vocally exhausting music, as singers have an incessant battle with his barrage of brass in the orchestra. Even so, Melchior, now in his sixties, is still singing *Tristan and Siegfried*, while Flagstad, in her mid-fifties, continues a triumphant career of matchless *Isolde* and *Brünnhildes*. Both had impeccable early training and have remained earnest disciples of the laws laid down by their teachers.

Puccini's music is much easier to sing, as it is so well written for the voice. All his characters are within the range of the voice for which they are written, and conceived in such a way that the music seems to carry the voice quite naturally, helping it to sweep up the high notes along the easy ascending line of his melody. Singing with an orchestra, of course, is far more taxing upon the voice than singing to a piano accompaniment. On the other hand, the orchestra, with its wealth of colour, generally gives the singer more support than the piano.

Speaking, strange as it may seem, tires the voice far more readily than singing. If I am to sing at night, particularly a long operatic rôle, I try not to speak for at least two hours before the performance. While not behaving like a mute, I avoid unnecessary conversation and keep as quiet as possible. There are very few theatres in this country where the prima donna is supplied with a restful piece of furniture upon which she might relax before a performance. In most dressing-rooms she is lucky if she gets a reasonably firm bent-wood chair at her dressing-table. On that account I relax at home before I start the day. If I happen to be singing that evening, I lie in bed late in the morning and thus remain refreshed for the rest of the day. During the late morning I sing my voice in. After devoting about fifteen minutes to scales I sing passages from the opera scheduled for that night. Some pages I sing in full voice, just as I would sing them on the stage, and others softly, as if I might be singing to myself. Shouting

should always be avoided by singers, as it is so wearing on the vocal chords. I remember one of the chorus men at Sadler's Wells losing his voice after an exciting day at a Wembley Cup Final when he shouted himself hoarse in favour of the losing team.

Fog is the singer's worst enemy, being an evil that cannot be combatted effectively. Protective measures can be taken against snow and rain, but not against fog. The singer has to breathe, and at each breath fog is of necessity inhaled. I do not find tobacco smoke particularly distressing, though I can hardly say that I enjoy singing in a fug-laden room after a public dinner party. There is always the danger that the smoke-infected air will catch the singer's throat as she takes a deep breath. Centrally heated halls are apt to dry the throat, though generally speaking my voice is not affected by extremes of temperature or climatic conditions. I remember my throat being parched by a centrally heated hall in Glasgow when I was singing at an orchestral concert. As the last item drew to a close I was compelled to miss one or two notes in order to swallow and be ready to tackle the heavy finale. The conductor gave me an anxious look, fearing for a moment that I had lost my place in the score. Some singers are affected by sea air and I have heard of more than one being unable to sing in Liverpool, as the climatic conditions of that city have a disastrous effect upon certain throats. I am glad to say that I am immune, having enjoyed many a successful engagement there, in both concert and opera. Sea air affected my throat at Folkestone, one very windy day. Arriving some hours before the concert, I enjoyed an exhilarating walk along the front, battling against the wind. Later, just before the concert, my throat was so dry that I feared I should be unable to sing a note. This escapade taught me a valuable lesson about sea breezes. "I do like to be beside the sea-side", but not inhaling the ozone when there is work to be done later in the day.

It is madness for a singer to attempt a performance with a cold in the throat, as the strain may deal roughly with the vocal chords

and cause a further half-dozen engagements to be cancelled. For the same reason it is unwise to sing too soon after such a cold. A cold in the nose is a different matter; the tone may sound rather more nasal than usual and the singer may have to resort to use of the handkerchief in public, but no further harm need be done.

I cannot recall any singers who indulge in strenuous exercise. Joan Hammond plays golf, as the walking provides healthy relaxation. Strenuous sports, such as tennis or squash, are not good for the voice, as apart from being exhausting, they usually leave one over-heated and in danger of catching cold. I have never been particularly attracted by any sports or hobbies. Even in my stenographer days I always preferred to sing in my leisure hours, and even now music is my favourite pastime, either singing for my own pleasure or listening to other artists singing or playing for mine.

X

DEMANDS OF A CAREER

THE public expect more and more from singers as the years go on. Without versatility an artist stands a poor chance of earning a living to-day, just as George Edwardes's Gaiety Girls, who relied so much on beauty, would soon get left behind in our modern theatre. At the turn of the century, when life was more leisurely and there was no competition in the shape of sound films, radio and television, it was comparatively easy for a singer to make a good living with a more or less limited repertoire. Ballads were in vogue at that time, when singers like Carrie Tubb and Hubert Eisdell could satisfy their listeners with groups of popular solos and duets that seemed to have an unfailing magnetism over the concert-goers of that time. Such songs as "Come into the Garden, Maud", "I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby", "O Lovely Night", "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep", "On the Road to Mandalay", "Three Fishers Went Sailing", "Lo, Here the Gentle Lark!" and Tosti's inevitable "Good-bye", were sung at concert after concert and must have earned the bread and butter of scores of established artists. No singer could hope to get by on so slender a repertoire to-day. The same artist is expected to be proficient in grand opera, oratorio, lieder and more popular fare, such as one hears on the lighter radio programmes.

A glance at my engagement pad gives some idea of what is expected of the singer to-day. Life is sometimes like a rush hour that lasts for several days. On a recent Saturday evening I sang Giorgetta in *Il Tabarro* at Sadler's Wells. The curtain rose at

seven o'clock and fell at eight. At that moment a radio "Music Hall" programme in which I was featured was just starting, with Ted Ray as compère. As these programmes are given in front of an invited audience I had to change into evening dress before leaving the theatre. A car was waiting at the stage door to rush me across London to the Paris Cinema in Regent Street, whence the "Music Hall" programme was being relayed. I arrived there at eight-thirty, only ten minutes before I was due to go on the air to sing "One Fine Day", followed by the Waltz Song from Lehar's *Paganini*. After the radio programme I was driven home, where I changed into travelling clothes and took the night train to Colne in Lancashire for a concert on the Sunday, consisting of a few operatic arias, followed by some lighter numbers in the second half of the programme. On Monday morning I was on my way back to London in order to sing *Butterfly* at Sadler's Wells that night. Every week-end is not the same, of course, but the modern singer has to be ready to cope with an eventuality of this kind, which is a far cry from the leisurely progress of Victorian ballad concerts. The artists must have such mastery over the music that the wear and tear of travel has no detrimental effect upon the actual performance.

A concert engagement calls for more self-control than an appearance in opera. There are moments on the concert platform when I feel like a goldfish in a bowl. All eyes are on me. The slightest movement is observed by the entire audience. If I am feeling rather tired from travel or over-work, and therefore more susceptible to a slight attack of nerves, I find a concert engagement far more difficult than an operatic appearance. On the platform it is impossible to hide even a nervous cough, but in opera one can invent a bit of stage business which necessitates turning one's back on the audience for a sufficient space of time to cough unobserved.

In the concert hall the keen concentration of the audience is liable to make the singer nervous, as there is no costumed character behind which she can hide her own identity. More

than ever, the concert artist will realise the necessity of singing with her whole body and not with her voice alone. She cannot act, like a prima donna in opera, but the studied use of restrained gesture will help enormously in projecting a song and make it all the more enjoyable for her audience. One listens with greater pleasure to a speaker who points his remarks with a wave of the hand or a nod of the head. He gives us a far more vivid mental vision than one who uses no more than his lips when he speaks. Even if the voice happens to be tired, the singer can help to cover up any minor deficiency by presenting a song in an engaging manner tempered with the right degree of appropriate gesture. It may be subtle camouflage, but it always pleases the audience, and in spite of headaches, mental exhaustion or other ills, helps to prevent the singer's performance falling below a certain level.

The good all-round singer must include oratorio in her repertoire if she hopes to become useful to impresarios to-day, and this type of music demands special study and approach. Such works as Handel's *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *Saint Paul*, Verdi's *Requiem* and the Bach *Mass in B Minor*, are constantly being performed, according to season, by various choral societies all over the country. They offer a substantial source of income to a number of vocalists. For all that, fewer singers now rely upon oratorio almost exclusively for their living, as happened with some of the Victorian artists, such as Ada Crossley and Edward Lloyd. As I have said already, singers cannot afford to be specialists to-day, and in consequence they must include oratorio as part of their plan of study.

I am not always in agreement with the manner in which oratorio is sung in this country. It is frequently too undramatic, and, if one may say so, approached with too great a degree of reverence, which sometimes tends to rob the works of their full beauty. The *Messiah*, for instance, is a musical narration of the greatest event in the history of the world, so why not sing the recitatives with more dramatic emphasis? All too often the

PLATE XI



As Octavian in ROSENKAVALIER at Covent Garden



As the imperious Tosca—at Sadler's Wells

soprano is expected to sing in a pure, bell-like voice, and on that account there are certain parts of the work which seem tame, when they should be ablaze with wonder and excitement.

As far as the Handel and Mendelssohn works are concerned they demand steady, balanced singing, so that the arias flow rhythmically, without the singer having to take too many breaths. In that respect they differ from opera, where the singer can break up the phrases more frequently to project the story. In oratorio the voice is expected to flow more easily, but the words still have to carry the story, though in most cases it is an incident from the Scriptures, known to all. Opera singers who turn to oratorio and treat this sacred music as opera are condemned by certain critics who are content to hear it sung in the same undramatic manner year after year.

I was delighted to hear my ideas on oratorio echoed by Sir Thomas Beecham, when he asked me to sing the part of the Queen of Sheba in Handel's rarely heard *Solomon*. "Sing it as an operatic character," he said. "Imagine it is a part in a Verdi opera." Such an approach brings new life to the music and makes the performance a more satisfying and vital experience. Verdi's *Requiem* calls for a more dramatic style of singing than one normally hears in Bach and Handel, and on that account voices which would be suited to the leading parts in his opera *Aida* are ideal vehicles for his sacred music. With so fiery an agitator as Sir Thomas Beecham in full cry, we may yet see oratorio released from the stranglehold of hide-bound tradition.

The mechanical wonders of sound-recording and broadcasting, unknown at the beginning of the century, are now everyday occurrences, but their existence means that the modern singer is called upon to master yet another technique. I find broadcasting far more taxing on the nerves than singing in opera or on the concert platform. The studio seems alive with unknown wonders and instead of being able to wander about the stage, as I do in opera, I have to stand in one place and sing to an

oddly fashioned device known as a microphone, as impersonal as a robot conceived by Karel Capek.

When I first stood in front of a microphone I was terrified. It was far worse than facing a capacity house at the Albert Hall. At first there was a suggestion of claustrophobia about the little broadcasting studio. After being used to singing in large theatres and concert halls, I felt oppressed by the closeness of the walls. Then there was that sinister looking metal monster, rising like a cobra before me. It meant that every note I sang would be relayed to hundreds of thousands of people all over the country, and maybe to cities in Europe and America, according to the wavelength and the time of day. There would be half-hearted listeners, such as housewives who tuned in for company while washing up; there would be more attentive listeners such as families sitting quietly round the fireside; most disturbing of all, there would be the experts, such as Elena Gerhardt, who might be listening to my rendering of a Schubert song which she herself had so often sung to perfection. What would she think of me? It was terrifying to contemplate.

What made matters even worse was the uncertainty of it all. These people might be listening, and on the other hand, they might not! At a concert or in the theatre one would often be told during the evening that such-and-such a musical celebrity was in front, but singing on the air seemed to produce a state of nerves without any definite cause. I soon realised that unless I took a firm hold of myself in the studio I might be reduced to a state of mental paralysis or acute stage-fright, through allowing my imagination to run riot.

A radio engagement, I soon discovered, could not be compared with a normal concert appearance. I knew the value of making a pleasing first contact with the audience. It was essential to come on to the platform with a smile, making a good entrance which would give the audience the impression that you were delighted to see them and grateful to them for having troubled to come along. It was necessary to be immaculately groomed and well

dressed, as a favourable stage presence makes a happier atmosphere all round. If the audience are pleased with the look of you they are likely to listen more intently and sympathetically; you feel they are going to be pleased with whatever you sing, because they are on your side. An audience must never be put in such a position that they have to make allowances for an artist, as far as her manner or appearance is concerned. It is her duty to look her best.

Yet it is useless in a broadcasting studio where the artist is shut out of sight. Being robbed of my visual personality, on these occasions I have to put enough expression into my voice to produce an effective mental image of my appearance on the minds of my listeners. In the concert hall I sing a gay song with a smile on my lips, which helps to convey the light-hearted quality of the music. As the smile would be lost at the microphone, the song has to be sung with a slightly exaggerated suggestion of gaiety in the voice, so that the mood comes over to the listeners. Additional care must be given to diction, so that the thought-content of the song is not missed on the air.

At one time artists used to be called to Broadcasting House at unearthly early hours in the morning to broadcast to Australia or Argentina, where the difference in time means that one country is enjoying noon sunshine while the other is plunged in the dead of night. On one occasion I had to sing in an overseas programme at two in the morning, but I cannot say that I enjoyed the experience. Nowadays the freer use of recorded programmes has done away with a good deal of singing at a time when the artist should be in bed.

I approach a broadcast and a recording in much the same frame of mind, as a recorded programme is really nothing more than a delayed-action broadcast and calls for the same technique in performance. I derive no comfort from the fact that it is merely a recording and could be performed again if an error made a repeat necessary. The orchestra would be involved in the repetition and, maybe, a chorus and other soloists, to say nothing

of the conductor and the radio technicians. The time element has to be considered as well. The schedule will not permit them to spend more than a certain length of time on any one programme, which is only a fraction of the day's broadcasting. So, even in a recording, the artist cannot be careless or casual. It is essential to remember that the microphone magnifies all faults, so the artist must never, never be caught out. Top form and the best of one's endeavour are more necessary in a broadcasting studio than elsewhere, as the microphone strips the singer of every asset but the voice.

Quick thinking is demanded from artists who take part in these mechanically devised programmes, which means that the would-be radio artist should have a thorough initial training. Apart from vocal studies the artist, in his student years, should persevere with the piano, if only for the benefit to be derived from being able to play his own accompaniments when learning new pieces. He cannot know too much about the theory and harmony of music; a good foundation and groundwork of musical knowledge can only be helpful. It will make the artist more reliable and proficient, enable him to become a quicker study, and give him greater confidence when working with other musicians of possibly longer and richer experience. At no time has the profession made heavier demands upon the artist, so the student must be prepared to work longer and harder than was necessary fifty years ago.

XI

RADIO OPERA

THE introduction of radio and its enormous popularity have caused the prima donna to revise her repertoire in the light of this comparatively new medium of presentation not even dreamt of in the nineteenth century. Oddly enough, Melba, one of the queens of the Golden Age, was about the first really celebrated artist to encourage radio pioneers, by singing from Chelmsford while this medium was in an experimental stage. Much progress had been made by 1926 when the last two acts of *La Bohème* were broadcast from Covent Garden on the occasion of her farewell to the operatic stage. Millions were thus able to hear that unique voice singing its swan song at the close of an unparalleled career. A great deal of thought has been given to radio programmes since Melba's farewell. At that time she did not have to consider adapting her performance to the limitations of the broadcasting studio. She simply walked on to Covent Garden stage and sang Mimi in the same old way which had endeared her to generations of opera-lovers. Microphones, installed at various key points, picked up the silvery notes and relayed them all over the world. She performed in costume and sang the uncut score which is expected in the opera house.

Studio opera performances, which have become the vogue since Melba's day, are rather different. Potted versions of the great operas are given, often lasting no more than an hour, performed in a studio by artists wearing everyday dress, without any of the glamour or excitement attending a theatre performance. Such occasions demand a rather special approach from the

singers. Typical of this kind of programme is the popular "Come to the Opera" feature which projects the essence of one of the great operas in the space of sixty minutes. One of my happiest radio recollections was singing *Tosca* in this series with James Johnston as Cavaradossi and Otakar Kraus as Scarpia, with the B.B.C. Opera Chorus and the B.B.C. Opera Orchestra conducted by Stanford Robinson. Stephen Williams introduced the programme and linked up the various scenes with a narration for the benefit of those listeners who were unfamiliar with the piece. The working conditions of this particular engagement, a carbon copy of dozens of others, might be described in detail.

The actual performance took place in the Camden Theatre in Camden Town, an attractive little playhouse opened by Ellen Terry in 1900, since deserted by play-goers, and now a valuable addition to the B.B.C. studios. The ground floor has been cleared of seats, apart from three rows in what must once have been the pit. A control room has been built at the back of the auditorium and the area which used to be known as the stalls is now occupied by the orchestra, grouped round the conductor's rostrum and the narrator's table. At various points microphones are suspended in mid-air to capture the notes of both singers and instruments. The soloists and chorus are accommodated on the stage, looking down upon the musicians in the stalls. The chorus singers are arranged on a tiered platform at the back, while the principals stand in front of them, each on a rostrum furnished with a music stand on which the score is placed.

Though I am supposed to give listeners an impression of the glamorous *Tosca* fighting for her honour with the ruthless Scarpia, there are times when I feel much more like a lay preacher reading the Lesson in church, as I turn over the pages of my music. The atmosphere is so very different from that of the opera house. There is a casual air about the Camden Town gathering, since the musicians wear easy clothes, such as sports

coats and flannel trousers, and in warm weather they invariably play in shirt sleeves.

Whether I sing *Tosca* in the opera house or at the Camden Theatre the music is the same, but there is a subtle difference in the two performances. Even on the air *Tosca* cannot be sung by someone who is no more than a vocalist, because the rôle demands interpretation. Apart from singing the music, the artist must be able to give an impression of character. In the second act, for instance, she must project something of the excitement which is felt in the theatre when she murders Scarpia and makes her escape from his palace. On the air it can only be done through the voice, as there is no visual image. Listeners cannot see me pick up the knife from the table and conceal it until the moment arrives for the fatal plunge, so I have to sing the part in such a manner that my expression conveys my state of mind and emotion.

More than ever, in the studio, the singer must concentrate upon the meaning of the words, so that she really assumes the part even without the aid of stage costume. On that account it is wiser to cast radio operas from singers who have sung the same rôles in the theatre. Ideal radio performances come from artists who can colour their voices more easily through previously having lived the parts in costume on the stage. They are more likely to bring the opera to life on the air than concert singers, who, though giving an excellent account of the music, may fall short on the dramatic side.

At the microphone, though no one can see me, I find myself using gesture quite freely, as I get carried away by the music, and I am convinced that it helps me to colour the voice and create the right impression. If one speaks on the telephone with a smile it registers on the person listening at the other end. The same sentence would sound very different if spoken with a frown.

Radio performances can be charged with a fuller degree of characterisation when sung with a certain freedom of movement. If I stood at attention to sing "*Vissi d'arte*", for instance, my

interpretation would be wooden and unresponsive. Even in the studio, when I reach the point just before I kill Scarpia I find myself shaking a clenched fist as I sing the dramatic lines. It is necessary to get a gasp of emotion in the voice if listeners are to appreciate the tense drama of the situation. At the end, when I discover that Tosca has been tricked by Scarpia's villainy and that Cavaradossi has really been shot, I have to sing "I cannot bear the strain". Quite unconsciously at a radio performance I have found myself leaning on the music stand for support at this point in the opera, so surely my voice must reflect something of Tosca's state of mind.

I think it better if the microphone is not placed too close to the singer. If it is some distance away she has greater freedom of movement. Feeling less restricted, she stands a better chance of living the part.

It is essential that one's diction should be rather more pointed in a radio operatic performance. The situation in hand is not visible to the eye of the listener, so it is more important than ever for the audience to know what is being said. In the opera house, even when the words are inaudible, it is usually possible to grasp the gist of a scene from happenings on the stage, but on the air everything depends upon diction. The narrator in an operatic programme cannot do more than outline the story, so if the audience is to appreciate the unfolding of the drama in detail, it is incumbent upon the singers to be sure that their words are discernible, especially in an opera such as *La Tosca*, in which many of the duets bear a close relation to theatrical dialogue.

Apart from *Tosca* I have appeared in radio productions of a number of other operas, including Roberto Gerhard's *The Duenna*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, in which I sang Santuzza, and *The Magic Flute*, in which I had my first experience of broadcast opera as the First Genie. Two major operatic broadcasts in which I took part were Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame* or *The Queen of Spades*, in which I sang Lisa, and *Tristan und Isolde*, in which I was chosen

by Sir Thomas Beecham to sing Brangäne to the Isolde of Marjorie Lawrence and the Tristan of Arthur Carron. I never considered Brangäne my part, as it is written for a mezzo-soprano, but Sir Thomas felt that my voice would blend with that of Marjorie Lawrence and insisted that I sang it. I learned the part in German in a month, while on tour with the Sadler's Wells Opera, and then coloured my voice as darkly as possible at the microphone.

Opera was written to be seen as well as heard, and on that account the finest possible radio performance cannot hope to rival a presentation of the work in the theatre. It is the same in the concert hall. I heard Kirsten Flagstad at the Albert Hall singing the finale from *Götterdämmerung*, with Furtwängler conducting. Though it was a magnificently moving performance, it had the effect of making me aware of the incompleteness of opera outside the theatre. I longed to see Brünnhilde on the stage, commanding the kindling of the funeral pyre. I wanted to see her place Siegfried's ring upon her finger, mount her white charger, and ride into the inferno. It is not that Flagstad's performance at the Albert Hall left anything to be desired. It was the finest possible interpretation of the music, but as the Fire Music was written to heighten a magnificent stage spectacle I wanted to hear it in the opera house, with my eye being feasted as lavishly as my ear. After all, that is only what Wagner would have wished.

I am convinced that singers give a more vivid performance of their rôles in the opera house. I first heard Flagstad sing Isolde's Liebestod at a concert and was struck by her rather cold interpretation of the music. Later I heard her at Covent Garden, where she was obviously inspired by the costume and the stage setting, with the result that her performance positively glowed as she sang that great apotheosis of love, longing and grief over Tristan's dead body. The stage presentation made all the difference to her interpretation. If artists as great as Flagstad are influenced by the atmosphere of the opera house, what about those of lesser standing?

Naturally radio listeners are anxious to hear the music of the greatest operatic composers—Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Rossini, Moussorgsky, Massenet, Donizetti, Gounod and the rest—but they must always bear in mind that they are never getting the complete work on the air. Operatic music is more than an accompaniment to the stage spectacle, which, in turn, is the means by which the singer interprets the rôle, created by the composer and librettist working in the closest collaboration. No doubt the listener prefers to hear *Götterdämmerung* on the air, without the stage curtain being raised, so to speak, rather than not hear it at all.

Under present broadcasting conditions, the more static operas make the most suitable radio material. It is easier for the music of the Mozart operas to stand alone. The stage action is not so closely woven into the musical score, and frequently the set arias which hold up the plot can be isolated in a manner not possible in Puccini or Wagner, where the music flows on without a pause from the rise to the fall of the curtain. Mozart rôles do not make the same dramatic demands upon the singer as the leading parts in Puccini, nor is there so much to miss in the way of dramatic stage pictures. On the air one longs for the sight of Rudolph flinging himself in despair across the dying Mimi's bed, or the heart-broken Tosca leaping to death from the battlements, but apart from Don Pedro's statue stalking into the feast in the last act of *Don Giovanni*, there are fewer dramatic stage sequences to be sacrificed when Mozart is broadcast.

A singer can never know her rôle too well, particularly in the broadcasting studio where there are so many distractions, such as technicians wandering about during the actual transmission, or fellow-singers taking advantage of a wait to tip-toe away for a drink of water. Anything might happen during a broadcast, so the artist has to be prepared and determined never to be taken by surprise. It must be remembered that a live microphone is so sensitive that it picks up the slightest inflection of the voice, so even the result of a studio distraction might easily be

detected by listeners, unless the singer is in full command of the situation.

A prima donna might be asked to introduce an operatic aria into a popular radio programme, such as "Music Hall", as I was on an occasion when Ted Ray was compère and I was requested to sing "One Fine Day" to an audience which had just been roaring with laughter at the typical vaudeville jokes of Max Bacon. Opera house experience came into play again and helped me to get the audience into a receptive frame of mind and keep them there, without so much as a cough, until I had finished my aria. Then Ted Ray took charge once more and regaled them with some nonsense about the crowded conditions of the parcels offices at the London railway termini. "Victoria's laden!" he concluded. Such frivolity is naturally not a feature of the more serious operatic broadcasts, but opera should always hold its own, no matter how it happens to be presented on the air. It can only meet with the serious reception it merits, if performed by artists who approach it with understanding and sing it with that same devotion which stage players bring to Shakespeare and Chekhov.

XII

THE TEACHER

MY first contact with a great teacher was in Berlin when I went to Germany for serious musical study under Professor Ernst Grenzbach. He taught me something more than voice production. Under his tuition I realised that instruction and guidance such as he gave me would be necessary not only in my student years but throughout my entire career. When I returned to England Madame Mendl subsequently took his place in my professional life and has been there ever since, helping me to master new works as they come along, and keeping an acute ear trained on my voice, to nip any faults or mannerisms in the bud.

Away back in Berlin I had soon realised that the more I came to know about singing and music in general, the more I had to learn. New fields were constantly opening up and each one had to be explored and conquered, making the study of singing a lifelong job. Many young singers imagine that if they have been to a college or had private lessons for a year or so, they are fully trained and can tackle any job that comes their way. Countless slipshod performances in the concert hall to-day are the result of such a practice. Only by continuous study is one aware of the innumerable snags and difficulties in singing and only through endless perseverance can one hope to master them. The fact that the singer's instrument is part of her own body makes her art even more elusive. When the pianist wants to make a certain musical sound he strikes a definite key on the piano and the job is done for him. The violinist presses his finger at a definite

point on his fiddle-string and thus produces his required note. It can be repeated as often as necessary, and each successive note can be an exact replica of the original one. It is not so easy for the singer. She cannot tap her throat with her forefinger to produce a top C. She cannot "get at" her vocal instrument and play it. It is out of sight and out of touch, which means that the singer can only become capable of producing the exact notes required of her by long practice and experience.

Infinite patience is required to master the art of singing, so that the singer can open her mouth and produce any given note with the same certainty that the pianist possesses when he strikes a definite ivory key. That is why one should only go to the best available teacher for training and interpretation. There is no question of going back to the maestro, after embarking upon a career. The singer should never leave him. Like a benevolent Svengali he should always be at hand, proud to guide his pupil from one artistic triumph to the next.

Individual tuition is always best, but I am all in favour of a college course for the acquisition of musical knowledge. No voice is ready for intensive training until the age of eighteen, but before that time the student should work hard at the piano, and the theory and harmony of music, covering valuable groundwork which will be a priceless asset at a later date, making the purely vocal studies so much easier to understand. The student cannot know too much, and all musical knowledge can be brought to bear quite profitably upon the study of singing technique. The concerted efforts by students at the end of term make excellent training. An opera, such as *Così fan Tutte* or *The Marriage of Figaro*, might be staged for a few public performances, giving students the feel of the stage and that vital contact with an audience. These productions are presented on more or less the same principle as a performance in an opera house, but as the cast is composed entirely of students the ordeal is not quite so nerve-racking as an appearance in the West End. Students are hardly expected to reach professional standards and

have the comfort of facing an audience prepared to make allowances for any shortcomings in their performance. These considerations lend an added confidence to the occasion, but must not be used as an excuse for slipshod results. Only the best possible is good enough for the public, and this maxim must be adopted by the student at the very beginning of his career and never forgotten. The public come to hear artists, and that in itself ought to be taken as something of a compliment, particularly by those who still have a reputation to make. On that account it is up to them to send their audience away with a feeling of satisfaction. As students are all liable to make mistakes there will be no overwhelming embarrassment at being corrected, as they are all out to learn and stage a praiseworthy performance.

Close association with a reputable teacher becomes necessary after the college career, when the student emerges from the chrysalis stage and begins to feel his wings as an individual artist, apart from the crowd, and possibly above it. Choice of teacher is a delicate and vital matter. A tutor who proves ideal for one singer may be useless for another. It is just as personal a matter as choosing a doctor, and the student must have as much faith in his maestro as in his medical adviser. Unless the student is inspired by his teacher and feels that he is making and maintaining progress, it is better to break away after a month or so, as no good can possibly come of their professional association. I am convinced that there are born teachers, who make it their mission in life to solve difficulties encountered by bewildered young artists. These teachers are not necessarily singers themselves, though, of course, they must know all about the voice from A to Z.

Jenny Lind or Enrico Caruso may not have been able to impart to others the secret of that artistry which brought the world to their feet, yet an obscure teacher, unknown to the music-loving public as a performer, might be capable of creating out of a promising student an artist such as appears but once in a lifetime. The first requirement in a teacher is the ability to impart knowledge, but it is often an advantage if the maestro happens to have

PLATE XIII



A studio portrait



In the dressing-room at Covent Garden—last minute adjustments before going on as Pamina in *THE MAGIC FLUTE*

been a singer. In that case he can possibly give more easily understood lessons by being able to illustrate them with vivid practical examples.

Endless patience is an indispensable virtue in the ideal teacher. He must be prepared to hear the same phrase sung over and over again until it is as perfect as he can hope to get it on the lips of the pupil in question. There must be no temptation to rush his pupil's studies, and pass over an aria bristling with faults. Each imperfect phrase must be repeated until it meets with his approval. Unless attention is drawn to each and every fault at the time, how will the student ever be conscious of their existence, and ever hope to eradicate them? Correction must be a deadly dull job for one who has been watching the same pitfalls for a generation or more. Small wonder that a good teacher, with enthusiasm still unimpaired, is so difficult to come by.

The teacher makes definite demands upon the pupil, but the pupil should expect something more than a watertight thirty-minute lesson from the maestro. It is helpful if he can take a personal interest in his pupil and attend some of her performances, thereby encouraging the youngster and observing how she reacts in front of an audience.

An aria which has been sung to perfection at home may not sound so good in an opera house, when the singer is dressed in character, performing before a crowded audience. The artist can do no more than imagine her performance is a good one. If the maestro takes the trouble to hear her, he can give a report that carries weight and means so much more than the flattering remarks of friends, which, though well meant, cannot be as informed as the observations of an authority.

Even now, though I have sung *Butterfly* more than 150 times, Madame Mendl still comes to hear me in the rôle. She naturally does not come every time I sing it, but I am always happy to know she is in front. She sees me afterwards, only too ready to indicate any little points that fail to meet with her approval. We work on them at my next lesson and thus get them eradicated.

In this way any little mechanical faults that might accumulate over the years are arrested in good time, before they have a chance to develop into a mannerism, of which I might be quite oblivious. A permanent teacher keeps me on my toes because I know that if I can sing to please her I stand a good chance of meeting with the approval of the most exacting audience. I feel that I am Madame Mendl's child and no teacher who failed to inspire similar sentiments could hope to become my ideal mentor. Madame Mendl takes a personal interest in my career, as well as a pride in my voice which has improved so much under her care and tutorship. When I secure an exciting engagement, such as a new operatic rôle or an unfamiliar oratorio, I break the news to Madame Mendl before anyone else, as I know she rejoices in my progress and shares all the ups and downs entailed in the preparation of a new work for performance in public.

I go to see her twice a week and usually stay an hour and a half each time. We generally work on music that I am about to sing in forthcoming engagements. I might be asked to sing an opera such as *Aïda* or *The Flying Dutchman* in concert version, or on the air, in which case her help is invaluable. I invariably take her word as final, so if I happened to be invited to sing a rôle which she considered unsuitable for my voice I should most certainly reject the offer. Better than anyone else she knows the capabilities of my voice, which she has seen growing up over a period of ten or more years. She knows its strength and its weakness, and her detailed knowledge of rôles in the more familiar operas, with the demands each one makes upon the voice, means that she is a mine of information when the question of enlarging my repertoire is under discussion.

Auditions are bound to play a vital part in the life of a professional singer, whether as a student going to a theatre for a job in the chorus or a famous prima donna going to the home of a composer to be considered for a rôle in a new opera. They are really both auditions in the long run, as a great deal hangs upon the result in each case. The student may get his first real chance to

start professional life and the prima donna may crown hers with her greatest triumph. So it is obvious that an audition always needs to be considered very seriously. That was one of the first lessons which Madame Mendl taught me and, thanks to her, I have treated every audition with the same care that I would lavish upon a minor rôle in an opera.

An audition is a nerve-racking experience, even at the best of times, as there is usually so much at stake and it is often held under the most depressing conditions on a bare stage in the light of a naked pilot bulb suspended away in the flies. On that account I soon realised it would be wise to sing only songs which I knew very well indeed. By choosing such numbers I felt that I could not be "put out" by any unexpected happening and I hoped that my fluttering nerves would not be visible to the judges sitting a few rows back in the stalls. I found it better to take more than one song, and usually prepared two or three of contrasting type and mood.

When seeking an engagement in a musical production I used to go armed with an operatic aria, such as "One Fine Day" from *Madame Butterfly* or the Jewel Song from *Faust*. In addition I always had three contrasting songs in my music case, generally "Vilanelle", "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life" and "Cherry Ripe". An operetta number is useful when attending an audition for a West-End show, so I would take one of the popular songs from *The Chocolate Soldier*, *Bitter Sweet*, *The Merry Widow* or *Glamorous Night*. Few of the people at mass auditions are allowed to sing a song from start to finish, or these functions would last all day and all night, judging by the number who turn up for a hearing. In most cases the candidates do little more than sing the last four bars of a song, so chosen to include the loud finish and show off the fullest and brightest part of the voice.

All the same, I had a supply of music with me, so that the management could hear more if they so desired. If they liked my operatic aria they could form some idea of my versatility by hearing one of the ballads or the operetta pieces, which might

reflect the emotion dominating one of the situations in the show they were casting. The candidate usually has no knowledge of the type of part the management is endeavouring to fill, so it is essential to take pieces of different style and mood in case she happens to be one of the lucky candidates told to stay behind for a second and longer hearing.

I always tried to look as attractive as possible at these auditions, without being ostentatiously dressed. An audition is really a rather special form of interview, so any girl who hopes to make a good impression must give some serious thought to her appearance. Those gentlemen in the stalls are not only listening to your voice. Their observation covers other aspects, especially if you are to appear in costume in a musical play or operetta. Your make-up, your hair-do and your general air of grooming will invite inspection and comment. I have come to the conclusion that there is not a very sharp dividing line between the artist on and off stage. The girl who has face powder on her day dress and strands of hair lying across her shoulders will probably be just as careless on the stage, where her costumes will be stained with eye-black or dusty with talcum powder. My operatic experience tells me that the girl who is slovenly off-stage is usually a disgrace on. She never comes to the theatre in time to apply a careful make-up, her wig is never trimly gummed to her forehead and she never wears her stage clothes as if they belonged to her. She always gives the impression of being dressed up instead of living in her costumes. A girl's everyday appearance is a key to her character and may play a greater part than she imagines in getting or losing a job at an audition. Perhaps I was fortunate in having a woman teacher who brought home to me the necessity of giving thought and attention to the manner in which my musical accomplishments should be presented. The dusty painted canvas, propped up against the skirting board of an artist's studio, looks infinitely more attractive when suitably framed and hung in the right light against a background specially chosen to heighten its beauty. Let the singer bear that in mind when she goes for her audition.

XIII

THE PUBLIC

FAR too much nonsense has been written and talked about the prima donna being the slave of the public. If she wishes to make any headway and command any respect in the world of music, surely she ought to be the servant of her art rather than the slave of her listeners. I have never been dominated by the public, though I realise that I could not hope to make a career if I failed to please them. For all that, I would never set out to please an audience by playing down to them or singing in a manner at variance with my own beliefs and ideas.

If an opera house invites me to appear as Butterfly I sing the part according to my own conception. Having already given considerable thought and study to the rôle I play it along lines which satisfy my own artistic conviction. Not being pig-headed about interpretation I am always ready to listen to suggestions and adopt them if I feel my performance can be improved on that account. On the other hand, I realise that I cannot please everyone. I should be a fool to try. Someone may write suggesting that I sing "One Fine Day" with my back to the audience, but I refuse to be swayed too easily by public opinion and random suggestions from people who come to see the opera. If I feel that my present rendering of the aria has the desired effect on the audience, it would be madness to try and sing it with my back to the footlights. I should be a traitor to my own artistic conscience if I changed the rendering against my will and better judgment, simply to please a member of the audience who saw the scene in a different light. Once I have made up my mind about the

essential characteristics of a rôle, and agreed them with the producer, I insist upon playing the part accordingly. I firmly believe that if the part is well enough played and forcibly registered upon the public, they are the first to applaud the rendering. To create such an impression it is essential for an artist to live with the part and feel it as a reflection of her other self. Once that happens she will never change her performance to suit the whim of her audience.

Opera-goers do not always disagree with a performance. After the last Act some of them always come round to express their admiration. Though I am profoundly grateful to them for troubling to stay behind to pay me a compliment, I am never in danger of losing my head on the strength of what they say. I am my own most severe critic. If I have had to sing Tosca with a blinding headache or agonising toothache I know quite well that I cannot possibly have given as good a performance as if I had been in the best of health. My devoted fans at the stage door may tell me that my performance was "out of this world", but I know in my own heart that, under different circumstances, it would have been very much better. So I accept their remarks with a certain reservation. All the same, it is rather flattering to hear a few admiring words, even after a performance blurred to some extent by the ills of the flesh.

If singers gave the public only what they wanted, no new music would ever be written, or at least, it would never be heard. I have no patience with the artist who plays down to the public by singing continually the same few arias upon which she originally built her reputation and which can always be certain of gaining an encore. I am all in favour of bringing new music to the notice of the public, in the hope that they will like it and demand to hear it again. In all modesty, I can say that concert audiences would be quite content if I always sang "One Fine Day" as my opening number, but I refuse to do so, because there are other pleasing pieces of music which ought to be heard. A man may be quite content with roast beef every day of the year, and because he likes it he may ask for it every lunch-time at

his City public house. He might be slightly disappointed one day when the waiter tells him that there is no roast beef, and places before him a plate of Hungarian goulash. Afterwards he will probably express intense satisfaction with the new dish, admitting that had he had his own way he would never have given himself the chance to taste it. It is the same in music.

Recently I was invited to sing in a popular radio feature, and as soon as I signed the contract I spent some hours playing through a selection of new songs sent by various music publishers. Some were very fine and I chose one with the intention of bringing it to the notice of millions of listeners. When I met the director of the programme a few days later to settle final details he appreciated my point of view, but said that as my name was so closely associated with *Madame Butterfly* I would be expected to sing "One Fine Day", if only to give pleasure to those opera-lovers who lived too far away from Sadler's Wells to attend my performances. I protested, maintaining that art would be at a standstill if audiences only heard music with which they were already familiar. I fear the B.B.C. had their way, as they insisted that the Puccini suited the policy of their particular programme, but they consoled me by promising to give the ballad a hearing at some later date in a different setting, possibly in a less popular programme. So I sang "One Fine Day" as requested, and can hardly say that I was over-pleased when, after the broadcast a friend, whose opinion I respect, telephoned to say that I had never sung *Butterfly's* aria better, though he must have seen twenty or more of my performances in the opera! What a vicious circle!

The public are bound to influence the choice of a concert programme, as the singer naturally includes one or two items which are sure to meet with general approval. There is a temptation to ensure success by giving listeners songs they know and to play for safety with a bright ending, such as a waltz song or a piece with an easy lilting rhythm. Now and again it is possible to slip in a new song, but as the occasions are so few and far

between one wonders how the poor composers manage to keep body and soul together. It is far from easy to sing unknown works of any magnitude, such as a complete new song cycle or an opera. They are a gamble unless previously sponsored by a wealthy patron of some musical society rich enough to stand the financial loss. The singer has to think twice before accepting such a responsibility, as an unusual work will need something more than everyday study, and very few vocalists can afford to let lucrative engagements slide while they devote extra time to learning a new work which may be no more than a one-night wonder.

Quite apart from bringing new music to the attention of the public, few singers can afford the time required to prepare a lieder recital. As I have already indicated, it calls for months of intensive study, and looked at from a purely commercial angle the time and energy may not bring in a penny or lead to a single future engagement. It gives satisfaction to the artist and pleasure to listeners with a higher degree of musical understanding, but that is not a very weighty consideration for the singer primarily concerned with making both ends meet. Much as she would like to sing such wonderful music, she has to devote her time to activities which are more financially rewarding.

The public does not influence the performance of a singer as vitally as that of a comedian, for instance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a broadcasting studio. Without an audience, the comedian is at a loss, because he has no means of knowing whether his jokes are falling on barren ground or not. The presence of people in the studio acts as a kind of barometer for his humour. He can use their laughter in order to time his next line, thereby giving the unseen listeners a chance to laugh for a similar period before he carries on with the script. Promoters of programmes seem to think people at home enjoy hearing laughter from the studio, as it conveys an infectious atmosphere of gaiety congenial to the comedian's work. It is all so different

for the singer, who can put over more or less the same performance with or without an audience, which listens quietly in any case and is not required to produce atmospheric effects for the millions beyond. With an audience in front, the singer must be careful not to rely too much upon dress, appearance or personality, as none of these assets will be visible to the far vaster listening public. It is safer to imagine they are not present and to concentrate solely upon the microphone. There are times when the small audience in a broadcasting studio may prove a distraction, particularly as they come by invitation, and are subject to having the length of their applause controlled by light signals.

In a theatre it is a different matter. A full house has an inspiring effect because the audience has paid to attend the performance, which is proof enough that they want to hear it, and the buzz of their conversation, subsiding into a hush as the conductor mounts the rostrum, produces an excitement which surges across the footlights and affects the artists on the stage. In some odd manner it is never the actual number of people that matters, but only the fact that the house is full. Singing opera to a full house at the New Theatre, which holds just over 900 people, is no less exciting than singing to a capacity house at Covent Garden, which accommodates more than double that number. Excited opera-goers enjoy sitting in a crowded theatre, gaining an added satisfaction from witnessing a performance that has obviously drawn the Town and caused many less fortunate members of the public to be turned away.

EPILOGUE

SINGING my way, with all its ups and downs, has given me such satisfaction that I would certainly do the same if I had my time over again. As music has always been my principal interest I consider myself fortunate in being able to sing for my living. It is what I can do best in life and, as it gives me great pleasure, I never get that distasteful Monday morning feeling experienced by millions who are compelled to turn their hand to uncongenial work in order to keep body and soul together.

A singer's life is not always easy, but in spite of endless travelling, constant study of new works, and the necessity of always keeping fit, it never becomes drudgery. There is a fascination in studying beautiful music in order to perform it in public, when, at one and the same time, I give pleasure to myself and to my listeners.

In common with actors and other theatre folk, the prima donna prides herself on being the humble servant of the public. It must not be imagined that such a statement is mere empty flattery from an artist to her audience. I know only too well that the affection of the public does much to compensate the singer for the trials and tribulations of her life. There is a deep and lasting satisfaction to be gained from sensing the appreciative silence of a packed house, waiting on every note before gratefully applauding the artist for the pleasure they have received.

Something is expected of the singer as she walks out on the platform and there is a gratifying feeling of accomplishment in giving audiences what they want, and sending them home with

EPILOGUE

the echo of beautiful music haunting their memory. There is always something of a thrill in being asked for an encore by a serious-minded audience, obviously not merely applauding out of politeness or because it happens to be an age-old custom. The genuine request for an encore gladdens my heart, assuring me, as it does, that I must have come up to the expectations of my listeners.

Though I may not know the name of a single soul out in front, I feel they are my friends. Their welcoming round of applause, before I sing a note, suggests they have come to enjoy themselves, and are ready to like me. In consequence, just as athletes are cheered to victory by a shouting multitude, a singer often rises to rare heights inspired by an audience exuding a friendly atmosphere.

My mother sensed that happiness inseparable from the career of a successful singer when she persuaded me to put my typewriter away and go to Berlin to learn the art of becoming a prima donna. It was a gamble, but she was right to encourage me to take a chance. Even had I been a mighty magnate in the business world, I could never have hoped for the happiness that is now a daily occurrence in my life as a singer. There is a decided thrill about facing the public, a thrill which is renewed at every performance throughout an artist's lifetime. There is no grinding routine about appearing in different theatres or concert halls, performing constantly changing programmes and conquering an audience that is never twice the same.

I believe that anyone who wants a thing badly enough will find a means of getting it. I likewise believe that real talent never remains hidden for the span of an entire lifetime. All of which is another way of saying that if a young woman with a good voice possesses the courage and perseverance necessary to see her through a professional career, she will certainly manage to get herself heard by the people who matter.

As in other walks of life, luck and the good fortune to meet the right people at the right time play a big part in the world of

music, and the would-be prima donna must never be deterred by heartaches and heart-breaks, which may come even after her first success and are only part of the price she has to pay for singing her way. But once the young artist wins the affection of the public the worst of the battle is over, for they will give her faith, courage and self-assurance such as she can acquire by no other means.

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